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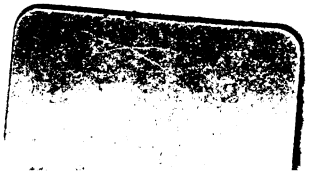

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Well, after all—

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By F. FRANKFORT MOORE

Author of I FORBID THE BANNS, THE JESSAMY BRIDE, A GRAY EYE OR SO, THE MILLIONAIRES, THE FATAL GIFT, ETC., ETC.

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Well, After All—

CHAPTER I.

"It was an interesting scene, beyond doubt," said Mr. Westwood, the senior partner in the Brackenshire Bank of Westwood, Westwood, Barwell, & Westwood. "Yes, I felt more than once greatly interested in the course of the day."

"Greatly interested? Greatly interested?" said Cyril Mowbray, his second repetition of the words being a note or two higher than the first. "Greatly int— Oh, well, perhaps you had your own reasons for feeling interested in so trivial an incident as a run on your bank that might have made you a beggar in an hour or two. Yes, I shouldn't wonder if I myself would have had my interest aroused—to a certain extent—had I been in your place, Dick."

Mr. Westwood laughed with an excellent assumption of indifference, a minute or two after his friend had spoken. Cyril could not understand why he had not laughed at once; but that was probably because he had not been brought up as the senior partner in a banking business, or, for that matter, in any other business.

"The fact is," said Mr. Westwood thoughtfully,

when his laugh had dwindled into a smile, as a breeze on the water dwindles into a cat's-paw, "the fact is, Cyril, my lad, I've always been more or less interested in observing men—men"—

"And women—women," said Cyril with a laugh. "You had a chance of observing a woman or two to-day, hadn't you? I noticed that Mrs. Lithgow—the little widow—among the crowd who clamoured for their money—yes, and that Miss Swanston—she was there too. She looked twenty years older than she is, even assuming that the estimate of her age made by the women in our neighbourhood is correct."

"Yes, I was always interested in observing my fellow-men," said Mr. Westwood musingly. "I noticed those women to-day. They were worth it. Women always give themselves away upon such an occasion. Men seldom do."

"By George, Dick, there were some men in the crowd that filled the bank to-day who gave themselves away quite as badly as the women!" said Cyril.

"No doubt; but some of them met me with smiles and made a remark or two regarding the extraordinary weather we have been having for May; they wondered if the good old-fashioned summers were gone for ever—some of them went so far as to express a sudden interest in my pheasants, before they came to business. But the women—they

made no pretence—they wasted no time in preliminary chatter. 'My money—my money—give me my money!' was what each of them gasped. They showed their teeth like—like"—

"Wolves?"

"Vampires rather, man. Isn't it wonderful that a woman—a lady—can change her natural expression of calm—the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere—to that of a Harpy in a moment? It makes one thoughtful, doesn't it? Which is the real woman, Cyril—the one who smiles pleasantly on you and insists on your taking another hot buttered muffin as you loll in one of her easy-chairs in front of her drawing-room fire, or the one who rushes trembling into your office and stretches out a lean talon-like gloveless hand, glaring at you all the time, with a cry—some shrill, others hoarse—of 'My money!—give me my money!'—which is the real woman?"

"They are not two but one," said Cyril. "Thunder and lightning are as natural as sunshine and zephyr. Revenge is as much a part of a woman's nature as love; constancy does not exclude jealousy. A woman is a rather complex piece of machinery, Dick."

"What! Has Lothario turned philosopher?" cried Mr. Westwood. "Has Mr. Cyril Mowbray become a student of woman in the abstract and an exponent of her nature?"

"Mr. Cyril Mowbray isn't quite such a fool as to fancy that he knows anything about the nature of woman beyond what any man who keeps his eyes open may know; only, when he hears a cynic such as Dick Westwood suggest that a woman can't be sincere when she asks you to have another piece of toast—or was it cake?—because he has seen her anxious to get into her own hand her own money that is to keep her out of the workhouse, Mr. Cyril Mowbray ventures to make a remark."

"And a wise remark, too," said Westwood. "I've noticed that women believe in the men who believe in them. They believe in you"—

"Worse luck!" muttered Cyril.

"And they don't believe in me—shall I say, better luck?"

"They believed in you sufficiently to place their money in your bank."

"But not sufficiently to be confident that I would refrain from swindling them out of it, should I have the chance. There's the difference between us—the difference in a nutshell. If the bank was yours and the rumour came, unaccountably as all such rumours come, that you were insolvent, the women whose money you held would say, 'Let him keep it and welcome, even if we have to go to the workhouse.' But the moment they hear that there is a chance of my not being able to pay my way, down they swoop upon me as the Harpies swooped down

upon Odysseus and his partners. And yet I have been quite as nice to women as you have ever been —in fact, I might almost say I've been rather nicer. After all, they only entrusted their cash to my keeping, whereas to you they entrust"—

"Worse luck—worse luck!" groaned Cyril. "That brings us back to the matter we talked over when we were last together. Poor Lizzie Dangan! You told me that I should confess all to my sister; but, hang it all, I can't do that! I tell you, Dick, I can't bring myself to do it."

"Psha! Let us talk of something else; I haven't much inclination to give myself up to the discussion of such trifles after what I have come through to-day. Heavens! how can you expect a man who has passed through such a crisis as only comes into few men's lives, to discuss the love affair of a boy and girl? Do you suppose that the men who had walked over the red-hot ploughshares would have made a sympathetic audience to the bard who had just composed a ballad about Edwin and Angelina? Do you think it likely that the three young men who passed through the seven-times heated furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar, or somebody, were particularly anxious, on coming out, to discuss the æsthetic elements in the Song of Solomon?"

"A few minutes ago you were referring to the run on the bank as if it was the merest trifle; you

were making out that you took only an academic interest in the incident."

"So I did, so I did; yes, while it lasted. I'm convinced, my friend Cyril, that a man who is being married, or hanged, or tried for some crime, regards the whole affair from quite an impersonal standpoint. Don't you remember how the Tichborne Claimant, on being asked on the hundredth day of his trial something about what was going on, said, 'My dear sir, I've long ago ceased to have any interest in this particular case'?"

"Yes, but the Tichborne Claimant was the most highly perjured man of the century."

"He drifted into accuracy upon the occasion to which I refer. Psha! never mind. Here we are at the gates, safe and sound, thank Heaven!—yes, thank Heaven and your sister. Cyril, you should be proud of her. I'm proud of her. What she did went a long way toward saving the bank."

"If those fools who were clamouring at the desks had only paused for a minute they would have known that the lodgment of a cheque could not save the bank."

"But Agnes was clever enough to know that panic-stricken men and women do not pause to consider such things. When they knew that your sister had lodged a cheque for £15,000 they became reassured in a moment. You saw how the men who had drawn out their money at one desk re-

lodged it at another? That's what's meant by a panic: the sheep that rush wildly down one side of a field will, if turned, rush quite as wildly back."

"Anyhow, it's all over now, and the credit of the bank is stronger than ever. I wish mine was. What's that man doing at the side of the gate?"

Cyril's voice had lowered as he asked the question. He touched his friend's arm as he spoke.

"Why, can't you see that that's Ralph Dangan? What's strange about a gamekeeper being at the entrance to the park?" said Westwood. Then, as the dog-cart passed, the man in corduroy, who was standing just inside the entrance gates, touched his hat. Westwood raised his whip-arm replying to his salutation, and cried, "Good evening to you, Ralph."

Cyril also raised his finger, and nodded to the man. But having done so he drew a long breath.

Westwood laughed.

"'The thief doth think each bush an officer,'" he said, shaking his head at his companion.

"I've been an awful scoundrel, Dick," said Cyril.

"I'm a polite man. I'll not contradict you," said Westwood. "You have every reason to be afraid of poor Lizzie's father, especially as his employment makes it necessary for him to have a gun with him at all times. An angry father who is a first-class shot with a gun is a man to be avoided by the impulsive sweethearts of his daughter."

"I can trust Lizzie," said Cyril.

"At any rate, she trusted you. More's the pity!" Cyril groaned.

"What am I to do, Dick—what am I to do?" he asked almost piteously.

"I think the best thing that you can do is to go out to Africa in search of Claude," he replied. "Such chaps as you should be sent to the interior of Africa in their infancy. You're savages by nature. I suppose we are all more or less savages; but you see, some of us become amenable to the influences of civilisation and Christianity, so that we manage to keep moderately straight. But, really, after the example we have had to-day of savagery, I, for one, do not feel inclined to boast of the influences of civilisation, the foremost of which should certainly be the power to reason. Heavens! the way those men and women glared at the clerks—the way they struggled to get to the cashiers. By my soul, Cyril, I believe that if they had not got their money they would have climbed over the counter and torn the clerks limb from limb—the women would have done that—they would, by heavens!"

"I believe they would, all except Patty Graves. She is engaged to young Wilson, and she would have protected him with her life," laughed Cyril.

"The savage instinct again," cried Westwood. "Alas, Cyril, my lad, I'm afraid that our civilisation is nothing more than a very thin veneer after all."

Then the dog-cart pulled up at the entrance to the hall, where a groom went to the horse's head while the two men, whose thoughts had clearly been moving on lines that were far from parallel, got down and entered the old house.

Cyril turned into the cloak-room of the hall whistling, for his troubles did not weigh him quite down to the ground; and Richard Westwood, also whistling, went up the shallow oak staircase, followed by a couple of small spaniels, who had responded with lowered muzzles and frantic tails to his greeting.

But when he had entered his dressing-room his affected nonchalance ceased. He dropped into an easy-chair and wiped his forehead with trembling hands. Then he leant forward and stared into the empty grate, as if he saw something there that demanded his most earnest scrutiny.

He gazed at that emptiness for a long time, the dogs inquiring in turn what he meant, and assuring him that it was impossible that a rabbit could be in any of the dark corners. When he paid no attention to them they retired to the window to discuss his mood between themselves.

CHAPTER II.

FOR three hours Richard Westwood had been subjected to a severer strain than most men have to submit to in the course of their lives. He was, as has already been stated, the senior partner in the chief banking house of Brackenshire—an old and highly-respected establishment. In fact, there was a time when the stability of the house of Westwood, Westwood, Barwell, & Westwood was regarded as at least equal to that of the county itself. Only an earthquake could, it was thought, produce any impression upon an English wheat-growing county, and a cataclysm of corresponding violence in the financial world would be required to shake the stability of Westwoods' Bank.

But in the course of time the importation of wheat in thousands of tons from America and elsewhere caused the most earnest believers in the stability of an English agricultural county to stand aghast; and then a day came when a bank or two of quite as great respectability as Westwoods' closed their doors and stopped payment all inside a single week. In a country where people talk about things being "as safe as the bank" such an occurrence produces an impression similar to that of a thunderstorm in December or a frozen lake in June:

people begin to question the accuracy of their senses. If the bank where they and their fathers and grandfathers have deposited their money for years back beyond any remembrance, closes its doors, what is there on earth that can be trusted?

It was toward the close of this phenomenal week that the rumour arose in Brackenhurst that Westwoods' Bank would be the next to fall. No one knew where the rumour originated—no one knew what foundation there was for such a rumour—no one who had money lodged in the bank seemed to inquire.

Even up to noon on the day when the run upon the Brackenhurst offices took place, nothing occurred to suggest that a panic was imminent among the customers of the bank. For two hours the business of the establishment was normal; Mr. Westwood was in his own room, discussing with his solicitor the validity of some documents offered as security for an overdraft by a local firm; the cashier, having received a few small lodgments, was writing a letter to the Secretary of the Styrton Cricket Club regarding the visit of the Brackenhurst Eleven on the Saturday; two of the other members of the staff were considering the very important question as to whether they should have their cups of coffee at once or wait for another half-hour, when, with the suddenness of a quick change of scenery at a well-managed theatre, the swing-

doors were flung open and the bank was filled to overflowing with an eager crowd, crushing one another against the mahogany counters in their endeavours to reach the stand of the cashier.

Panic-stricken were the faces at which the cashier looked up from his half-finished letter—faces that communicated their panic to all who saw them. The cashier caught it in a moment: he glanced hastily round as if seeking for a way of escape.

The men and women, perceiving that he had lost his head, became wilder in their attempts to get opposite his desk. Outside, the crowd, striving to reach the doors of the bank, had become clamorous. The High Street of Brackenhurst was in an uproar. The two clerks had ceased to discuss the great coffee question. They were thinking of their revolvers.

As the panic-stricken cashier stood looking vacantly into the pale faces before him, but making no effort to attend to the three men who waved their cheques across the counter, Mr. Westwood came out of his room by the side of his solicitor. He was smiling as he shook hands and said goodbye. There was an instantaneous silence in the place.

"We shall see you at the cricket match on Saturday," were the words that came through the silence from Mr. Westwood, as he shook hands with the other man. "If the weather continues like this it will be a batsman's day."

He waved his hand as the solicitor went out into the crowd. The crowd that had been almost clamorous a minute before were now breathless with astonishment. They stared at the man who, when ruin was in the air, was talking of cricket. A batsman's day! A batsman's day! What did it mean? What manner of man was this who could talk quietly of a batsman's day when over his head the sword of Damocles was hanging?

The silence was unnatural; it became terrifying. Every one watched Mr. Westwood as he walked round to where the cashier was standing. He paid no attention to the clerk, but glancing across the counter, nodded pleasantly to one of the men who had been waving the cheques, like pink flags, in the direction of the desk.

"Good day, Mr. Simons," said he. "What a dry spell we are having. They talk of the good old-fashioned summers—how is it you are not being attended to?" He turned to the cashier. "Come, Mr. Calmour, if you please; I fear I must ask you to stir yourself; it's likely to be a busy day. You want a cheque cashed, Mr. Simons? Certainly. You also have your cheque, Mr. Thorburn, and you, Mrs. Langley?"

"We want our money, sir," said Mrs. Langley. She was a tall, bony lady, who had been the first to enter the bank. She was the principal of the Ladies' Collegiate School.

"So I understand, my dear lady," said Mr. Westwood. "You shall have every penny of your money."

From every part of the crowd hands were thrust, each waving a pink cheque. The people were no longer silent. One or two men of those nearest to Mr. Westwood nodded to him. One made a sort of apology for asking for his balance at once—a sudden demand from a creditor compelled him to do so, he said, with a very weak smile. Another hoped Mr. Westwood's pheasants promised well. But beyond these actors were men with staring eyes, women with white faces become haggard within a few minutes, small tradesmen bareheaded and still wearing their aprons, artisans who had saved a few pounds and had placed all in the keeping of the bank, clergymen as anxious to draw their balance as their churchwardens, and painfully surprised that their parishioners should decline to give away to them in the common struggle to reach the counters.

The banker ceased to smile as he glanced across the crowd. He turned to the cashier, who had already got into action, so to speak, and was noting cheques preparatory to paying them.

"We shall have a busy hour or two, Mr. Calmour," the head of the firm was heard to say. "Pay away all your gold without the delay of a moment. I shall bring you another ten thousand from the strong room."

One could almost hear the sigh of relief that passed round the crowd as Mr. Westwood hurried into his own room. Two clerks had come to the cashier's desk bringing their books with them, and now the three members of the staff were hard at work, paying away gold in exchange for cheques. Within the space of a few minutes the bank porter, followed by Mr. Westwood, entered the cashier's cubicle staggering beneath the weight of two large leathern bags, strapped and sealed. He threw them on the counter with a dull crash—the sweetest music known to the sons of men—and to the daughters of men as well—the crash of minted gold.

Mr. Westwood broke the seals of one, and in view of every one who had managed to crush near enough to see, sent a glittering stream of yellow gold flowing from the mouth of the bag into the cashier's till. He pressed the sovereigns and half-sovereigns flat with his hand and continued pouring until the receptacle could hold no more. Then he laid the bag, still half-full, in a deep drawer, and by its side he placed the second bag with the seal still unbroken.

This second bag was apparently even heavier than the first, for Mr. Westwood had to put forth all his strength to lift it from the counter to the drawer. An hour afterwards one of the clerks was able to lift it between his finger and thumb, and

was astonished beyond measure at Mr. Westwood's cleverness in suggesting to the clamorous crowd that the second bag was like the first, full of gold, when it was quite empty.

But when the business of replenishing the cashier's till had been gone through, Mr. Westwood retired to watch the operations incidental to the cashing of the cheques. The technique of the transaction was much more tedious than it usually was; for as every cheque presented was drawn for the balance of an account, the cashier had to verify the figures, which involved the working out of two sums in compound addition, whereas the normal work of cashing a cheque required only a glance at the figures. Rapidly though the cashier now made his calculations, several minutes were still occupied in comparing the figures, and in more than one instance it was found that the drawer of the cheque had made a mistake in his addition through his haste in writing up his pass-book. It became perfectly plain to every one, especially those applicants who were still very far in the background, that only a small proportion of the cheques could be paid up to the time of the bank closing its doors.

Dissatisfied murmurs filled the office; outside there was a clamour of many voices.

At this point Mr. Westwood came forward.

"It is quite plain, ladies and gentlemen," said he, addressing the crowd, "that at the present rate of

cashing your cheques, not a tenth of you can be satisfied to-day. I will therefore instruct my cashier to give you gold for your cheques without going too closely into the exact balance. I will trust to the honour of the customers of the bank to make good to-morrow any error they have made in their figures, and I have also given instructions for the doors of the bank to remain open an hour longer than usual."

There was a distinct brightening of faces in the neighbourhood of the cashier's desk, and a cheer came from the people beyond. It was plain that the production of the bag of gold and the dummy bag had done much to allay the panic, but it was also plain that the confidence shown by Mr. Westwood in the resources of the bank to meet the severest strain, had done much more than his adroit handling of the gold to restore the shaken trust of his customers. Fully a dozen men pushed their cheques into their pockets and left the bank.

Their departure, however, only served to make room for the entrance of an equal number of the crowd who had not been able to crush their way into the bank previously.

Mr. Westwood leant across the counter and chatted with one of the tradesmen who had been in the front rank of those who wished to draw out their balance. He now said to the banker that he had come to make an inquiry about a bill of his

drawn upon a trader in a neighbouring town; he was anxious to know if it had been honoured. The bill clerk had given him the information, and now he was doing his best to respond to the friendly chat of Mr. Westwood.

Some clever people who watched these intervals of comedy in the course of the tragedy which they believed was being enacted, said that Mr. Westwood had nerves of steel. Others of the visitors to the bank, not being clever enough to perceive that Mr. Westwood was acting a part with great ability, felt that they were fools in doubting the solvency of a concern the head of which could treat such an incident as a run on his bank as an everyday matter. They did not press forward with their cheques. They pocketed their cheques and looked ashamed.

Mr. Westwood would have been greatly disappointed if they had continued to press forward. He had been a good friend to many of them. He knew that they would not have the courage to draw their balances under his very eyes, as if they believed him to be a rogue.

And then his personal attendant came to tell him that his midday cup of coffee awaited him, and he said a word about Saturday's cricket match to the tradesmen before nodding good-bye. Before returning to his private room, however, he stood beside the cashier for a moment, and his smile changed to a slight frown.

"Oh, Mr. Calmour, can you not contrive to be a little more expeditious?" he said. "We shall never get through all the business in the time if you are not a trifle quicker. Could not Mr. Combes make up rouleaux of ten and twenty sovereigns so as to have them ready for you to distribute? Come, Mr. Combes, stir yourself. Every cheque must be paid within the next hour."

Mr. Combes stirred himself—so did Mr. Calmour—yes, for a short time; then it seemed that he shovelled out the sovereigns with more deliberation than ever; for he had felt Mr. Westwood's toe pressing upon one of his own as he had given him that admonition to be more expeditious. The cashier had long ago recovered his wits. He was well aware of the fact that, although Mr. Westwood's style was calculated to allay distrust, yet every minute's delay might mean hundreds of pounds saved to the bank. He understood his business, and that was why he thought it prudent to count one of the piles of sovereigns passed to him by his assistant, young Mr. Combes, and to declare with some heat that it was a sovereign short, a proceeding that necessitated a second count, and the passing of the rouleaux back to the clerk.

And this waste of time—this precious waste of time that went to save an old-established house from ruin—was watched by Richard Westwood from a clear corner half an inch in diameter in the stained-

glass window of his private room door. He was not drinking his coffee. The cup, with a liqueur of cognac, stood on his desk untouched. He had fallen on his knees below the glass of his door, not to pray —though a prayer was in his heart—but in order to get his eye opposite that little clear space, which enabled him to observe, without being observed, all that went on outside.

He made up his mind that if his cashier only wasted enough time to save the bank he would give him an increase in salary from that very day.

He returned to the public office munching a biscuit, in less than half an hour; and he saw that once more his affectation of unconcern was producing a good impression. While he was absent there had been a good deal of noise in the public office. Men who had just entered were shouldering women aside in their anxiety to reach the cashier, and the women —some of them ladies—had not hesitated to call them blackguards and rowdies—so shockingly demoralised had they become in the race for their gold. Half a dozen police constables entered the public office, but not in time to prevent a serious altercation.

The nonchalance of Richard Westwood when he once more appeared caused the newcomers to stare. How could he continue munching a biscuit if his business was at the point of falling to pieces? "Men do not munch biscuits when they know themselves

to be on the brink of a precipice," the people were saying.

And then there came a sudden shriek from a lady who was fainting; and when she was carried out, there came a shrill cry from another who, with a wild face and staring eyes, declared that her pocket had been picked. She stood shrieking as if she had lost her reason with her purse, and then she clutched the man nearest to her by his collar, accusing him of having robbed her. A couple of constables struggled through the crowd until they got beside her, and Mr. Westwood leaped over the counter and pushed his way toward her.

He hoped that a few more exciting incidents would occur within the hour; every incident meant a certain amount of confusion and, consequently, delay in the cashing of cheques. Delay meant the saving of the bank from utter ruin.

He was disappointed in this one promising case: before he had reached the woman a constable had found in her own hand the money which she accused the man of stealing. She had never loosed her hold upon it, though with the other hand she still clutched the unfortunate man's collar, and could with difficulty be persuaded to relax her grasp, protesting that the constables were in a conspiracy to rob her. She was forced into the street in a condition bordering upon insanity.

The atmosphere had become charged with ex-

citement as a cloud becomes charged with electricity, and in a few minutes some other women were crying out that they had been robbed. Richard Westwood was becoming more hopeful, though he saw with regret that, in front of the cashier, there were a dozen stolid tradesmen, every one of whom had a balance of at least a thousand pounds. They were waiting their turn at the desk with complete indifference to the scenes that were being enacted behind them. Within half an hour twelve thousand pounds would be paid away, Richard Westwood perceived. His only hope was that the panic would be diverted into another channel—that the fools who had lost their heads over their money might go on accusing one another—accusing the constables—accusing any one. In such circumstances the police might insist on the doors of the bank being closed at the usual hour—nay, even before the usual hour.

But while he was pretending to be exerting himself with a view to reassure a frantic lady, who declared that she had been robbed of a hundred pounds, though she had never been half-a-dozen yards from the entrance, and had consequently not received a penny from the cashier, the swing doors were flung wide, and a lady with a young man by her side stepped out of the porch and looked about her. Richard Westwood saw her, and his face, for the first time, became grave.

Then the lady—she was a handsome woman, tall

and dignified—gave a laugh, and in a moment there was silence in the place where all had been noise and confusion. All eyes were turned toward the newcomers.

"Great Scott!" cried the young man—he was perhaps a few years over twenty, and he bore a strong likeness to the lady, who was certainly several years older. "Great Scott! What's the matter here? Hallo, Westwood, I hope we don't intrude upon a Court of Sessions. My sister has come on business, but if you've let the bank"—

"If you have a cheque to be cashed," began Mr. Westwood gravely, "I shall do my best to"—

"But I haven't a cheque to be cashed," said the lady. "On the contrary, I have some money to lodge with you; fifteen thousand pounds—it's too much to have at home; it wouldn't be safe there, but I know it's perfectly safe here."

CHAPTER III.

"YOUR money will be perfectly safe here, Miss Mowbray," said the banker quietly. "But I'm afraid my clerks are too busily occupied to have a moment to spare to receive it to-day, unless you wait until my customers get their cheques cashed. You're getting well through your business, Mr. Calmour?" he added, turning to the cashier.

"Slowly, sir. I haven't touched the second bag of twenty thousand," replied the cashier.

"I'm sure Cyril will be able to reach the desk," said the lady, "and it will only occupy a clerk half a minute entering the lodgment. Good heavens! Mr. Westwood, it takes a clerk no longer to receive and enter up a cheque for fifteen thousand pounds than it does for a single note."

Mr. Westwood gave a laugh and a shrug of his shoulders.

"Give me the cheque," said Cyril. "I'll lodge it or perish in the attempt."

The good humour with which he set about the task of forcing his way through the crowd, spread around. The people who a few minutes before had been struggling with eager faces and clenched hands to get near the desks, actually laughed as the young man, holding the cheque for fifteen thou-

sand pounds high above their heads, made an amusingly exaggerated attempt to shoulder his way forward. He had no need to use his shoulders; the people divided before him quite good-naturedly. He reached the cubicle next to that of the cashier's in a few seconds, and handed the cheque and the pass-book across the counter to a clerk who had stepped up to a desk to receive the lodgment.

The silence was so extraordinary that the scratching of the clerk's pen making the entry was heard all over the place.

And then—then there came a curious reaction from the excitement of the previous two hours: the tremendous tension upon the nerves of the people who fancied they were on the verge of ruin, was suddenly relaxed. There came a clapping of hands, then a cheer arose; every one was cheering and laughing. The cashier found himself idle. He availed himself of the opportunity to wipe his forehead with his handkerchief; until now he had been compelled to shake the drops away to prevent them from falling on the cheques or the leaves of his ledger.

He stood idle, looking across the maghogany counter in amazement at the people who were laughing and cheering the tradesmen, poking their thumbs at each other's ribs, others pressing forward to shake hands with Mr. Westwood. The cashier, being happily unaccustomed to panics,

looked round in amazement. How was it possible that the people could be so ignorant as to imagine that the stability of a bank which has only a small gold reserve to meet the demands of a run upon it, is increased by the fact of a cheque being lodged?

This was what he felt inclined to ask, Mr. Westwood could see without difficulty, when he glanced in the direction of Mr. Calmour, but he knew something of men, and had studied the phenomena of panics. He would not have minded if his cashier had protested against so erroneous a view of the situation being taken by the people who a short time before had been clamouring for gold—gold—gold in exchange for their cheques. Mr. Westwood knew that his cashier's demonstration, however well founded it might be—however consistent with the science of finance, would count for nothing in the estimation of these people. He knew that as they had originally been moved to adopt the very foolish course which had so very nearly brought ruin to him, by an impulse as senseless as that which compels a flock of sheep to leap over a precipice simply because one very silly animal has led the way, they had, on equally illogical grounds, but in keeping with the habits of the sheep, allowed themselves to be moved in exactly the opposite direction to that in which they had rushed previously. A cheque! If the crowd had been sufficiently self-possessed to perceive that the mere

lodging of a cheque in the bank did not increase the ability of the bank to pay them the balance of their accounts in gold, they would certainly have been able to perceive that, to join in a run upon the bank, simply because some other bank a hundred miles away had closed its doors, was senseless.

Richard Westwood knew that the action of Agnes Mowbray had arrested the run and the ruin. He saw that already some of the men who had cashed their cheques, but who had not had time to reach the doors, were relodging the cash which they had received. The panic that now threatened to take hold upon the crowd was in regard to the security of the money which they had in their pockets. They seemed to be apprehensive of their pockets being picked, of their houses being robbed. Had not several ladies been clamouring to the effect that their pockets had been picked? Had not Miss Mowbray declared that she could not consider her money secure so long as it remained unlodged in the bank?

While he chatted to Miss Mowbray and her brother Cyril, Richard Westwood could see that his cashier was closing and locking the drawers of his desk; the busy clerk was the one who was receiving the lodgments.

He laughed, but in no more audible tone of exultation than had been his an hour before, when he had emptied the bag of sovereigns into the till and

had lifted, with a great show of fatigue, the dummy bag from the counter to the drawer. He felt that he could not afford to give himself away in the presence of the mob. He knew that the clutch for gold makes a mob of the most cultivated people.

"How good of you! how wise of you!" he said to Agnes in a low tone when the crowd had drifted away from them and the office was rapidly emptying. "But the cheque—how did you get the cheque?"

"You did not see whose signature was attached to it?" said Agnes.

"I only saw that it was a London & County cheque."

"It was signed by Sir Percival Hope."

"I do not quite understand how you could have a cheque signed by Sir Percival Hope."

"He gave it to me; he trusted me as I have trusted you. He would have done so without security if I had accepted it on such terms. I declined to do so, however. I placed in his hands security that would satisfy any bank—even so scrupulous a bank as Westwoods'. I handed over to him all my shares in the Water Company."

"They are worth twenty-five thousand pounds at least. Great heavens! Agnes, you never sold them for fifteen thousand pounds?"

"Oh no; I did not sell them. I only deposited them as security with Sir Percival. You see I had

not long to make up my mind what to do. Only an hour and a half ago I heard of this idiotic run upon the bank. Oh no; neither Sir Percival nor I had much margin for deliberation. He told me that unless I lodged gold with you it would be no use. He laughed at the idea of my fancying that a cheque would be as useful to you as gold. But you see"—

"Yes, I see; I see. And I believed that it required a man to understand men, and that only a clever man understood what was meant by a panic among men and women. I was a fool. For the past two hours I have been trying to stem the flood of that panic—the avalanche of that panic. I have been smiling in the faces of those fools; they were fools, but not great enough fools to fail to see through my acting. I have been pretending that dummy money bags were almost too heavy for me to lift. That trick only got rid of half-a-dozen men, and not one woman. I came out from my room munching a biscuit, to make them believe that I regarded the situation as an everyday one, not worth a second thought. I bluffed—abusing the cashier for the time he took to count out the money, promising to pay the full amount of all the cheques without taking time to calculate if they were correct to the penny. It was all a game of bluff to make the people believe that the bank had enough gold to pay them all in full. But I failed to deceive more

than a few, though I played my part well. I know that I played it well; I like boasting of it. But I failed. And then you enter. Ah, my dear, I am proud of you; you are the truest woman that lives. You deserve a better fate than that which has been yours."

"I am content to wait, my dear Dick. I have come to think of waiting as part of my life. Will it be all my life, I wonder?"

"No, no; that would be impossible. That would be too cruel even for Fate."

Agnes Mowbray looked at him for a few moments. He saw that the tears came into her eyes. Then she gave an exclamation of impatience, saying:

"Psha! my friend. What does it matter in the general scheme of things if one woman dies waiting to marry the one man on whom she has set her heart? My dear Dick, what is life more than waiting—a constant waiting that is never repaid? Is any man, any woman, ever satisfied? No matter what it is that we get, do we not resume our waiting for something else—something that we think worth waiting for? Psha! I am beginning to preach; and whatever women do they should not preach. Good-bye, Dick. Why, we are almost left alone."

"My poor Agnes—my poor Agnes!" said he, looking at her with tenderness in his eyes. "Never

think for a moment that he will not return. Eight years is a long time for him to be lost, but he will return. Oh, never doubt that he will return."

"I have never yet doubted the goodness of God," said she. "I will wait. I will accept without a murmur my life of waiting. He will not mind my grey hairs."

She gave a laugh—after a little pause. In her laugh there was a curious note that sounded like a defiance of Fate. The man laughed also, but she saw that he knew very well that as a matter of fact there were several grey threads among the beautiful brown of her hair.

That was all the conversation they had at that time. She went away with her brother Cyril, who had been trying to get Mr. Calmour to listen to his views regarding the bowling policy to be pursued at Saturday's match. Cyril had his own views regarding the slow bowling of young Sharp, the rector's son. It was supposed to be very baffling, and so it was on a bad wicket. But if the wicket was good—and there was every likelihood that the fine weather would last over Saturday—the batsmen would simply send every ball across the boundary, Cyril declared with great emphasis.

He was in some measure put out when Mr. Calmour turned to him suddenly, saying:

"I beg your pardon. What is it you've been talking about?"

"What should I be talking about if not the bowling for Saturday?" cried Cyril.

"Oh, the bowling. What bowling? Saturday —what is to happen on Saturday?" said the cashier.

"You idiot! Haven't we been discussing"—

"Oh, go away—go away," said Mr. Calmour wearily. "Heaven only knows what may happen between to-day and Saturday. If you could have any idea of what I've gone through to-day already —bless my soul! it all seems like a queer dream. Where are all the people gone? Why have they gone, can you tell me? I haven't paid away all my gold yet. I've still over two thousand pounds left. Have they closed the doors of the bank? They were fools—oh, such fools! But I could have held out. I had three or four tricks left. And now what's to become of me? I support my mother—she's an old woman; and I have a sister in another town—she is an epileptic. We are all ruined with the bank."

The cashier put his hands up to his face and burst into tears. The strain of the previous hour had been too much for him. It was in vain that Cyril Mowbray slapped him on the back and assured him that the bank was safe and that his mother and sister might reasonably look forward to a brilliant future. It was in vain that Mr. Westwood shook him by the hand, promising never to forget the

way in which he had worked through the crisis. Mr. Calmour refused to be comforted. He continued weeping, and had to be conveyed to his home in a fly.

Richard Westwood had begged Cyril to drive to Westwood Court and dine with him; and now the banker was sitting in his bedroom, staring into the empty grate as he recalled the incidents of the terrible day through which he had passed.

The boom of the gong which came half an hour later aroused him from his reverie. He started up with a great sigh, and was surprised to find himself as weary as if he had had a twenty-mile ride. He went to a looking-glass and examined his face narrowly. It looked haggard. He remembered having heard of men's hair becoming grey in a single night. He quite believed such stories. He thought it strange that his hair should remain black. He was thirty-six years of age—four years older than Agnes, and he had noticed that she had many grey hairs—she had talked of them when they had stood face to face in the bank.

He wondered if waiting for an absent lover was more trying than being the senior partner in a bank during a severe financial crisis.

He went downstairs to dinner without coming to any satisfactory conclusion on this rather difficult question.

CHAPTER IV.

WESTWOOD COURT had been in the possession of the family of bankers since the days of George II. It had been built by that Stephen Westwood whose portrait was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. In the picture the man's right hand carries a scroll bearing a tracing of the plans of the house. Before it had been completed, however, Sir Thomas Chambers had something to say in regard to the design, the result being sundry additions which were meant to impart to the plain English mansion the appearance of the villa of a Roman patrician.

It was a spacious house situated in the midst of one of the loveliest parks in Brackenshire—a park containing some glorious timber, some brilliant spaces of greensward, and a trout stream that was never known to disappoint an angler, however exacting he might be. It was scarcely surprising that love for this home was the most prominent of the characteristics of the Westwood family. Every member of the family, with but one exception, seemed to have inherited this trait. The one exception was Claude Westwood, the younger brother of Richard.

During his father's lifetime he had been in a cavalry regiment, and while serving in India, had

taken part in a rather perilous frontier campaign against a strange set of tribesmen in the northwest. He had become greatly interested in the opening up of the conquered territory, and as soon as his father died he had left the regiment and had done some remarkable exploration work on his own account, both in the northwest of India and in the borderland of Persia.

He returned to England to recover from the effects of a snake-bite, and to stay for a month or two with his brother, to whom he was deeply attached. But when in Brackenshire he had formed another attachment which threatened to interfere with the future he had mapped out for himself as an explorer. He did not notice any change in his brother's demeanour the day he had gone to him confiding in him that he had fallen in love with Agnes Mowbray, the beautiful daughter of Admiral Mowbray, who had bought a small property known as The Knoll, a mile from the gates of the Court. Richard Westwood had found it necessary for the successful carrying on of the banking business, which he had inherited, to keep himself always well in hand. If his feelings were not invariably under control, his expression of those feelings certainly was so; and this was how it came that, after a pause of only a few seconds, he was able to offer his brother his hand and to say in a voice that was neither husky nor tremulous:

"Dear old chap, you have all my good wishes."

"I knew that you would be pleased," Claude had said. "She is the sort of girl one only meets once in a lifetime. I have lived for a good many years in the world now, and yet I never met any girl worthy of a thought alongside Agnes. How on earth you have remained in her neighbourhood for a year without falling in love with her yourself is a mystery to me."

A sudden flash came to Dick's eyes, and he was at the point of crying out, "Have I so remained?" But his usual habits of self-control prevented his showing to his brother what was in his heart. He had merely given a laugh as he said:

"I suppose it must always seem mysterious to a man in love that every one else in the world does not display symptoms of the same malady."

"I daresay you are right," Claude had answered, after a pause. "Yes, I daresay—only—ah!—Agnes is very different from all the other girls in the world."

"You recollect Calverley's lines:

> "'I did not love as others do—
> None ever did that I've heard tell of'?

Ah! you lovers are all cast in the same mould. But how about your projected exploration—you can scarcely expect her to rough it with you at the upper reaches of the Zambesi?"

Claude Westwood looked grave. For some weeks he had talked about nothing else except the splendid possibilities of the Upper Zambesi to explorers; and his brother had offered to share the expenses of an expedition thoroughly well-equipped to do all that Livingstone and Baines left undone in that fascinating quarter of Africa.

"Perhaps she will refuse me," said Claude.

"Ah! perhaps; but if she does not refuse you?"

There was a long pause. Claude rose from his chair and walked to the window. He looked out over the sloping lawns and the terraced Italian garden; the blue swallows were skimming the surface of the huge marble basin where the water-lilies floated. He seemed greatly interested in the movements of the birds.

At last he turned suddenly round to his brother, and laid his hand on his shoulder, saying:

"Dick, I should like to win her. I should like to offer her a name—the name of a man who has done something in the world. Whatever happens I am bound to make the expedition to the Zambesi."

* * * * * *

Dick Westwood had, while sitting before the empty grate, recalled all the incidents of eight years before—he recollected how a level ray of the red sunlight had flickered through the leaves of the copper beech and made rosy his brother's face—he

could still feel the strong clasp of his hand as they had separated to dress for the dinner which Admiral Mowbray was giving that evening. He remembered how Agnes had looked at the head of the table—oh, he had felt even then that she was not for him, but for his brother—how could he have fancied for a moment that he would have a chance of her love when Claude was near?

The expression on Claude's face when they met to go home together told him all; but he did not need to be told anything. He knew that it was inevitable. Agnes had accepted Claude: she had accepted him and told him to go out to Africa; she would wait for him to return, even though he might not return for ten years, she had said, laughingly.

Alas! alas! the lover had gone at the head of his expedition to the Zambesi, and for seven months news had come from him at irregular intervals—for seven months only; after that—silence. No line came from him, no rumour of the fate of the expedition had reached England, though at the end of the second year a large reward had been offered to any one who could throw light on the mystery.

Eight years had now passed since the expedition had set out from Zanzibar, and there was only one person alive who rejected every suggestion that disaster had overtaken Claude Westwood and his companions. It had become an article of faith

with Agnes that her lover would return. The lapse of years seemed to strengthen rather than to attenuate her hope. Her father had died when Claude had been absent for two years, and almost his last words to her had been of hope.

"Fear nothing for him; he will return to you. I know what manner of man it is that succeeds in the world, and Claude Westwood is not the man to fail. I shall not see him, but you will. Whatever happens, whatever people round you may say, don't relinquish hope for him."

Those had been her father's words, and she had obeyed their injunction. She had not given up hope, although no one in the neighbourhood ever thought of mentioning the name of Claude Westwood in her hearing. It seemed that the very memory of the man had died out in Brackenhurst. She had not given up hope although now and again she had been startled to see a grey hair where a brown one had been.

And for eight years Richard Westwood had watched her, wondering what would be the end of her devotion—what would be the end of his own devotion. People in the neighbourhood could not understand him. They took the trouble every now and then to invent a theory to account for his singular rejection of the delicate hints that had been thrown out to him by mothers of many daughters —hints that the head of the house of Westwood

had certain duties in life—social duties—to discharge. The theories were more or less ingenious; but even when some of them had come to his ears he remained as obdurate as ever. He merely laughed, and the man who laughs is well known to be the most discouraging of men.

But Cyril Mowbray did not find him very discouraging as he sat with him on this evening after dinner, for the dinner had been an excellent one and his cigars were unexceptional. They were in their easy-chairs in front of a French window, the leaves of which were open. The square of the window enclosed as in a frame an exquisite picture of the dim garden. The sound of cawing rooks in the distant elms was borne through the tranquil air. The scents of the earliest roses stole within the room at mysterious intervals. It was a perfect summer's night, and Cyril felt that though there were troubles in the world, yet on the whole it was a very pleasant place to live in.

There had been a pause in the conversation, which had related mainly to a very pretty young girl named Lizzie Dangan, the daughter of the head gamekeeper at Westwood Court—the man who had touched his hat as the dog-cart drove through the entrance gates. The silence was suddenly broken by Cyril's exclaiming:

"You are a first-rate chap, Dick. Why shouldn't you marry Agnes?"

Dick's eyes flashed upon him for a moment, and it seemed to Cyril that he detected a certain curious drawing in of his breath that sounded like the stifling of a sigh. The exclamation which came from him immediately afterwards seemed incongruous—it was an exclamation that suggested the putting aside of an absurdity.

"Oh, you may say 'psha!' as often as you please," said Cyril; "it will not alter the fact that Agnes and you would get on very well together. I know that she thinks a lot of you—so do I."

"That's very kind of you," said Dick. "But you're talking nonsense—worse than nonsense. Agnes has given her promise to marry my brother Claude. Let us say no more about it."

"It's all very well for you to say, 'We'll say no more about it,'" cried Cyril, with an air of responsibility—the responsibility of a brother who refuses to allow the affections of his sister to be trifled with. "It's all very well for you to say that; but when I think how long this sort of shilly-shallying has been going on—well, it makes me wild. Agnes is now over thirty—think of that—over thirty, and what's more, she's not getting any younger. I'm anxious to see her settled. I think I've a right to ask if she's engaged to marry Claude. Where's Claude now? Does any sane person believe that he is still in the land of the living?"

"Your sister believes it, and she is sane enough.

However, I'm not going to discuss the question with you, my friend; or, for that matter, with anybody else."

"That's all very well; the fact remains the same. Here's a fine house thrown away upon a bachelor, and there's Agnes, who would suit you down to the ground, waiting"—

"Waiting—waiting—that is exactly her position."

"Waiting—yes; but for what? For what, I ask you as a man of the world? Your brother is dead, beyond a shadow of a doubt, and here you are alive and hearty. Doesn't it say something in the Bible that when a chap's brother dies"—

"Cyril," said Dick Westwood, rising with an impatient jesture, "we'll have no more of this. I won't allow you to talk any longer in this strain. Shall we finish our cigars in the garden?"

"All right," said Cyril, rising. But before they had taken a step toward the open French window, there seemed to arise from the earth the figure of a man, and he stood in the window space looking eagerly at each of them in turn.

CHAPTER V.

THE stranger stood with his back to whatever light there was remaining in the sky, but Dick Westwood and his guest could see what manner of man he was. He wore a short beard and moustache. His clothes were shabby, and so was his soft hat. He might have been a foreman of mechanics just left off work.

Westwood stepped to the wall and switched on a lamp. Then he scrutinised the stranger closely. The man had entered the room through the French window.

"Who are you, and what do you want, my good fellow?" said Westwood. "It is customary for visitors to pull the bell at the hall door."

"I pulled the bell. They told me you were at dinner and could not be disturbed, sir," replied the man.

No one who heard him speak could think of him as an ordinary mechanics' foreman. He spoke like a person of some culture.

"And they told you what was true," said Westwood. "Allow me to say that it is most unusual for a total stranger to force himself into a house in this fashion. I must ask you to go away at once unless you have something of importance to com-

municate to me; unless—good heavens! is it possible that you come with some news of my brother?"

Dick had given a start as the idea seemed to strike him. Cyril also started, and looked at the stranger narrowly.

"I know nothing of your brother, Mr. Westwood," said the man. "But I know you. I know that it was into your hands I put my money a year ago, and I have come to you for it now. I tried to come before the bank closed, but I missed the connection of the trains at the junction. I live in the North now. I want my money, Mr. Westwood."

Mr. Westwood turned upon the man.

"You should know well enough that this is not the time or the place to come about any matter of banking business," said he. "I don't remember ever seeing you before, but even if I did remember you, I could only give you the answer I have already given. I shall be pleased to go into any business question at the bank. I decline to hold any business communication with you at this time or in this place. I have had business enough and to spare for one day. I must ask you to come to the bank in the morning."

"I've no notion of being put off in that way, Mr. Westwood," said the man. "How am I to know that your bank will open to-morrow or any

other day? I got a telegram at noon telling me that Westwoods' would be the next of the county banks to go to the wall, and I hurried up from Midleigh, where I am employed, hoping to be in time to pluck my savings out of the ruin; but, as I told you, I missed the train connection. But here I am and here"—

"I do not wish to hear anything further about you or your business at this time, my good sir," said Richard. "I have been courteous to you up to the present. I must now insist on your retiring. It would be insufferable if a man in my position had to be badgered on business matters at any hour of the day and night. Come, sir."

He had gone to the side of the window and made a motion with his hand in the direction of the garden.

"Look here, Mr. Westwood," said the man, "you know me well enough. My name is Carton Standish, and I lodged with you just a year ago the six hundred pounds which I had saved for my wife and child. You know that I speak the truth. Psha! What's the use of going over the matter again?"

"That's what I ask too; so I insist"—

"It's not for you but for me to insist," broke in the man. "It's for me to insist, and I do insist. Come, sir, hand over that money of mine without the delay of another minute. It's my money, not

yours, and I decline to be swindled out of it by you or any other cheat of a bankrupt."

"You have mistaken your man," said Richard Westwood quietly. "Stay where you are, Cyril." Cyril had taken an angry step toward the stranger. "Stay where you are; I think I am equal to dealing with this gentleman alone. Come now, Mr. Standish, if that is your name, the last word has passed between us; if you don't clear out of my house inside a minute I shall be forced to throw you out."

"You infernal swindler!" shouted the man. "This is your last chance—this is my last chance. Hand me over my money or I'll kill you!"

He had drawn a revolver and covered Dick Westwood with it in a second. At the same instant the door of the room opened and a footman appeared.

Cyril had sprung toward the man, but Dick Westwood restrained him by a gesture, and then turning to the servant, said quietly:

"Bentley, show this gentleman out by the hall door."

The man had lowered his revolver—it had only been pointed at Westwood for a moment. He looked at the weapon strangely, then with an exclamation he tossed it out of the open window. It fell with a soft thud on the grass border of the terrace, but did not explode.

The footman drew a long breath. He did not seem to relish the duty of showing out an excited

man with a six-chambered revolver in his hand. He felt that that was outside the usual range of a footman's duties. He went to the door and stood beside it in his usual attitude.

"If you have swindled me, you need not think that you will escape," said the visitor, striding across the room until he faced Dick. "I have not been a good husband, or perhaps father, at times; but I was making amends for the past. I had saved that money for my wife and child, and now—now—if it's lost, I swear to you that I'll kill you."

"You'll not do it to-night, at any rate," said Dick.

"Are you so sure? Are you so sure of that?" said the man in a low tone, going still closer to him, his hands clenched in an attitude of menace.

Then he suddenly wheeled about, and walking to the door, left the room without a word. His steps died away up the hall, followed by the soft-treading servant. The sound of the closing of the hall door reached the room before either Westwood or Cyril spoke. Then it was the former who said:

"Is it possible that you have allowed your cigar to go out? Oh, you young chaps; good cigars are thrown away upon you!"

He was smoking his own cigar quite collectedly. Cyril gave a laugh. He did not feel quite so much a man of the world as he had felt when giving his friend the benefit of his advice some minutes before.

"I fancied that something exciting was about to take place to rouse this stagnant neighbourhood," said he. "Like you, Dick, I'm interested in men. That chap looked a desperate rascal. Do you remember anything of him? Did he actually lodge money with you a year ago?"

"Yes; what he said was quite true," replied Westwood. "I can't for the life of me recollect who recommended him to the bank, but I'm nearly sure that he opened an account with us. I felt that his arriving here to-night was a sort of last straw so far as I am concerned. Good heavens! haven't I gone through enough to-day to last me for some time, without being badgered by a fellow like that —a fellow whose ideas of diplomacy are shown by his calling one a swindler—a cheat! That was the best way he could set about coaxing a man like me to do him a favour."

"Is he a dangerous man, do you think? There was a look in his eye that I did not like," said Cyril.

"A man is not dangerous because of a look in his eye, but rather because of a revolver in his hand; and you saw that that poor fool was more afraid of it than I was," said Westwood. "Oh, he's a poor sort of fellow after all. No man shows up worse than one who tries to be threatening in a heroic way. He sinks into the mountebank in a moment. He'll be all right in the morning when he handles

his money—assuming that he will draw out his balance, which is doubtful. Most likely he will have recovered from his panic, and will apologize. Take another cigar, and don't spoil this one by letting it go out."

Cyril helped himself from the box, and immediately afterwards the footman entered with a tray with decanters. Cyril took a whisky and Apollinaris, and Dick helped himself to brandy.

"The first spirituous thing I have handled to-day," he said with a laugh. "And yet before I left the bank I could hear my clerks inquiring anxiously for brandy."

"What nerves you have!" said Cyril. "I suppose they run in your family. Poor Claude must have had something good in that line."

"Yes," said Dick, "he has good nerves."

Cyril noticed that he declined to accept the past tense in regard to Claude.

"Do you mind testing mine by playing a game of billiards?" asked the younger man.

"I should like a game above all things—but only one. I must be early at the bank in the morning, if only to receive our friend Standish's apology. Come along."

They went off together to the billiard-room, which was built out at the back of the dining-room; and they had their game, finishing with the scores so close together that Westwood, who, when Cyril

was ninety-seven and he only eighty, ran out with a break of twenty, declared that he had felt more excited by the game than he had at any time of the day—and he confessed that he had found it a rather exciting day on the whole.

It was past eleven when Cyril set out for home, and the night being one of starlight and sweet perfumes, Dick said he would stroll part of the way with him and finish his cigar. They went along together through the shrubbery and across one of the little subsidiary tracks that led from the broad avenue to a small door made in the park wall, half a mile nearer The Knoll than the ordinary entrance gates. Cyril unlocked the door, for the year before Dick had given him a private key for himself and Agnes in order that they might be saved the walk round to the entrance gates when they were visiting the Court. For a few minutes the two men stood chatting on the road, before they said good-night, and while the one went on in the direction of The Knoll, the other returned to the park, pulling-to the door, which had a spring lock.

The night was wonderfully still. The barking of a dog at King's Elms Farm, nearly a mile away, was heard quite clearly by Richard Westwood, and now and again came the sharp sound of a shot from the warren on Sir Percival Hope's estate, suggesting that a party were shooting rabbits in the most sportsmanlike way, the chances being, on such a

night, largely in favour of the rabbits. After every shot one of the peacocks that paraded the grassy terraces of the Court by day, and roosted in the trees by night, sent out a protesting shriek.

All the nocturnal creatures of the woodland were awake, Dick knew. As he paused for a few moments on the track he could hear the stealthy movement of a rat or a weazel among the undergrowth, the flicker of the wings of a bat across the starlight, the rustle of a blackbird among the thick foliage. He had always liked to walk about the park at night, observing and listening, and the result was that none of his gamekeepers had anything like the knowledge which he possessed of the woodland and its inhabitants.

When he reached the house and had let himself in with his latchkey, he went to the drawing-room where he had sat with Cyril after dinner. He threw himself back in his easy-chair, and he seemed to hear once again the voice of Cyril asking him that question:

"Why shouldn't you marry Agnes?"

He asked himself that question as he sat there now. He had put it to himself often during the past two years. Was there any treason toward his brother in the fact that that question had come to him, he wondered. Could any one fancy that his brother was still alive? Could any one believe that the insatiate maw of tropical Africa, which has

swallowed up so many brave Englishmen, would disgorge any one of its victims?

He might still pretend that he believed that Claude was still alive, but in his heart he could not feel any hope that he should return. He wondered if Agnes had really any hope—if she too were trying to deceive herself on this matter—if she were not trying by constant references to his return to make herself believe that he would return.

Had Fate ever dealt so cruelly with two people as it had with himself and Agnes? He believed that if any direct evidence had been forthcoming of Claude's death, Agnes might, in course of time, have listened to him, and have believed him when he told her that he loved her—that he had loved her for years—long before Claude had come to tell her that he loved her. Even now. . . . He wondered if he were to go to her and ask her for his sake to leave the world of delusion in which she was content to live—the atmosphere of self-deception which she was content to breathe and to call it life when she knew it was nothing more than a living death—would she listen to him?

He sat there thinking his thoughts until the sound of the church clock striking the hour of midnight came to him through the still air.

He rose with a long sigh—the sigh of a lover who hopes that hope may come to him before it is too late to dissipate despair, and he was about to

switch off the light, when he was startled by the sound of a footstep on the gravel of the walk between the grass of the terrace and the French window. The sound was not that of a person walking on the path, but of one stepping stealthily from the grass.

In another moment there came a tapping on the window—light, but quite distinct.

He switched off the light in an instant, and stepped quickly to one side, for he had no wish to reveal his whereabouts to whatever mysterious visitor might be watching outside. He slipped across the room to the switch of a tall pillar lamp standing close to the window, and when the tapping was repeated, he turned on the light, and looked from behind a screen through the window.

He quite expected to see there the man who an hour and a half before had threatened him, and he was, therefore, greatly surprised when he saw the figure of a girl peering into the room. He hastened to the window and opened it.

"Good heavens, child, what has brought you here at such an hour?" he said. "Lizzie, I'm ashamed of you; it is past midnight."

"Every one is ashamed of me, sir," said the girl; she was a very pretty girl of not more than twenty. She was a good deal paler and her features had much more refinement than the face of an ordinary country girl.

She stepped through the window as she spoke. He knew that she did so quite innocently—she would not keep him standing at the open window.

"You have made a little fool of yourself, Lizzie," he said; "and I fear that you have not learned wisdom yet, or you would not have come here at such an hour. What have you got to say to me? Let us go outside. We can talk better outside. But I hope you haven't got much to say to me. I have to get up early in the morning."

She stepped outside, and he followed her. They walked half-way round the house until they came to the rosery, which was at the side opposite to that where the servants' rooms were situated.

"I don't want you to fall into worse trouble, my dear," said he. "Now tell me all that you think I should be told."

"I knew that I had no chance of speaking to you in an ordinary way, sir," said the girl, "so I slipped out of Mrs. Morgan's cottage and came here."

"That was very foolish of you. Well, what have you to say to me?"

"You know my secret, sir. Cyril—I mean Mr. Mowbray, told me that you knew it; but no one else does—not even my father—not even Miss Mowbray —and I'd die sooner than tell it to any one."

"Yes, yes, I know. To say you were both foolish would be to say the very least of the matter. But you at any rate have been punished."

"God knows I have, Mr. Westwood."

"Yes, it is always the woman who has to bear the punishment for this sin. I wish I could lighten yours, my poor child."

"You can, sir, you can!" The girl had begun to sob, and she could not speak for some time. He waited patiently. "I have come to talk to you about that, sir," she continued, when she was able to speak once more. "Sir Percival Hope's sister has promised to give me a chance, Mr. Westwood; but only if I agree never to see him again."

"And, of course, you agreed. You are very fortunate, my girl."

"Yes, sir, I agreed; but—oh, Mr. Westwood, he has promised to marry me when he gets his money in two years, and I know that he will do it, for I'm sure he loves me, only—oh, sir, I'm afraid that when I'm away, where we may never see each other, he may be led to think different—he may be led to forget me. But you, Mr. Westwood, you will be on my side—you will not let him forget me. That is what I come to implore of you, sir: you will always keep me before him so that he may not forget that he is to marry me?"

"Look here, Lizzie," said he, after a pause; "if I were you I wouldn't trust to his keeping his promise to you. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I have been talking to Cyril, and he knows what my opinion of his conduct is. He has told me that he

would marry you to-morrow if he only had enough money to live on. I advised him to confess all to Miss Mowbray, and if he does so I have made up my mind to send him off to a colony with you, making a provision for your future until he gets his money."

"Oh, sir—oh, Mr. Westwood!" cried the girl, catching up his hand and kissing it. "Oh, sir, you have saved me from ruin."

"I hope that I have saved both of you," said he. "Now, get back to Mrs. Morgan's without delay. I hope that it may not be discovered that you were wandering through the park at midnight. Why, even if Cyril discovered it he might turn away from you."

After a course of sobs mingled with thanks, the girl went away, and Richard Westwood strolled back toward the house.

CHAPTER VI.

It was rather early on the next morning when Agnes Mowbray was visited by Sir Percival Hope. Cyril, who had returned home late on the previous night, and had not gone to bed for nearly an hour after entering the house, was not yet downstairs; but his sister was in her garden when her visitor arrived.

Sir Percival Hope was one of the latest comers to the county. He was the younger son of a good family—the baronetcy was one of the oldest in England—and had gone out to Australia very early in life. In one of the southern colonies he had not only made a fortune, but had won great distinction and had been twice premier before he had reached the age which in England is considered young enough for entering political life. On the death of his father—his elder brother had been killed when serving with his regiment in the Soudan campaign of 1883—he had come to England, not to inherit any estate, for the last acre of the family property had been sold before his birth, but to purchase the estate of Branksome Abbey in Brackenshire, which had once been in his mother's family. He was now close upon forty years of age, and it was said that he was engaged in the somewhat arduous work of

nursing the constituency of South Brackenshire. There were few people in the neighbourhood who were disposed to think that when the chance came for him to declare himself he would be rejected. It was generally allowed that he might choose his constituency.

He was a tall and athletic man, with the bronzed face of a southern colonist, and with light-brown hair that had no suggestion of grey about it. As he stood on the lawn at The Knoll by the side of Agnes, and in the shade of one of the great elms, no one would have believed that he was over thirty.

"I got your letter," said Agnes when she had greeted him with cordiality, for though they had known each other only a year they had become the warmest friends. "I got your letter an hour ago —just when you must have got mine, which I wrote last night. I hope you are able to give me as good news as I gave you."

"You were able to tell me of the saving of the bank; I hope I can tell you of the saving of a soul," said Sir Percival.

"I hoped as much," she cried, her face lighting up as she turned her eyes upon his. "Your sister must be a good woman—as good a woman as you are a man."

"If you had waited for half an hour when you came to see me yesterday, I could have told you

what I come to tell you now," said he. "But you were in too great a hurry."

"I had need to make haste," laughed Agnes. "Every moment was worth hundreds of pounds—perhaps thousands."

"And the good people were perfectly satisfied with my cheque? Well, they are a good deal more confiding than the colonists to whom I was accustomed in my young days: they would have laughed at the notion of offering them a cheque when they looked for gold, although in the bush cheques are current. Oh no; when they make a run on a bank nothing but gold can satisfy them."

"I knew what I could do with those people yesterday. They only needed some one to arrest their panic for a moment, and then like sheep they were ready to go off in the opposite direction."

"And you saved the bank?"

"No, not I. You saved it: the cheque was yours. And now it is through you that that poor girl is to be saved. How good you are. What should we do without you in this neighbourhood?"

"The neighbourhood did without me for a good many years. Never mind. I have come to tell you that my sister will be glad to take your young *protégée* under her roof and to give her a chance of —well, may I say, redeeming the past? You are not one of the women who think that for one sin there is no redemption. Neither is my sister. She

is, like you, a good woman—not given to preaching or moralising in the stereotyped way, but ever ready to lend a helping hand to a sister, not to push her back into the mire."

"After all, that is the most elementary Christianity. Was there any precept so urged by the Founder as that? Christianity is assuredly the religion for women."

"It is the only religion for women—and men. My sister will treat the girl as though she knew nothing of her lapse. There will be no lowering of the corners of her mouth when she receives her. She will never, by word or action, suggest that she has got that lapse forever in her mind. The poor girl will never receive a reproach. In short, she will be given a real chance; not a nominal one; not a fictitious one; not a parochial one."

"That will mean the saving of her soul. Her father has behaved cruelly toward her. He turned her out of his house, as you know, because she refused to say what was the name of her betrayer."

"You mentioned that to me. All the people in the neighbourhood seem to be most indignant with the poor girl because of her silence on this point. They seem to feel that their curiosity is outraged. They do not appear to be grateful to her for having stimulated their imagination. And yet I think it was hearing of this attitude of the girl that caused

my sister to be attracted to her. That's all I have to say on this painful matter, my dear friend."

Agnes Mowbray gave him her hand. Her eyes were misty as she turned them upon his face. Several moments had passed before she was able to speak, and then her voice was tremulous. A sob was in her throat.

"You are so good—so good—so good!" she said.

He held her hand for a minute. He seemed to be at the point of speaking as he looked earnestly into her face, but when he dropped her hand he turned away from her without saying a word.

There was a long silence before he said:

"We have been very good friends, you and I, since I came back to England."

His words were almost startling in their divergence from the subject upon which they had been conversing. The expression on Agnes's face suggested that she was at least puzzled if not absolutely startled by his digression.

"Yes," she said mechanically, "we have indeed been good friends. I knew in an instant yesterday that it was to you I should go when I was in great need. I knew that you would help me."

He looked at her gravely and in silence for some moments. Then he suddenly put out his hand to her.

"Good-bye," he said quickly—unnaturally; and

before their hands had more than met for the second time he turned and walked rapidly away to the gate, leaving her standing under the shady elm in the centre of the lawn.

For a moment or two she was too much surprised to be able to make any move. He had never behaved so curiously before. She was trying to think what she had said or what she had suggested that had hurt his feelings, for it seemed to her that his sudden departure might be taken to indicate that she had said something that jarred upon him.

She hastened across the lawn and through the tennis-ground, to intercept him on the road. Only a low privet hedge stood between the road and the gardens of The Knoll, and she reached this hedge and looked over it before he had passed. She saw him approaching; his eyes were upon the ground.

It was his turn to be startled as she spoke his name, looking over the hedge. He looked up quickly.

"Did I say anything that I should not have said just now?" she asked. "Why did you hurry away before our hands had more than met?"

"Shall I come back?" he said, after looking into her eyes with a curious expression in his. "Will you ask me to return?"

"I will—I will—I will," she cried. "Please return and tell me if I said anything that hurt you. I

would not do so for the world. Nothing but gratitude and good feeling for you was in my heart. Oh yes, pray return."

"If I were wise I should not have returned when you made use of that word 'gratitude,'" said he when he had come beside her, through the small rustic gate which she opened for him from the inside. "Gratitude is the opposite to love, and I love you."

With a startled cry she took a step or two back from him, and held up her hands as if instinctively to avert a blow.

"I have startled you," he said. "I was rude; but indeed I do not know of any way of saying that I love you except in those words. I have had no experience either in loving or in confessing my love. I came here this morning to say those words to you, but when I looked at you standing beside me under the elm—when I saw how beautiful you were—how full of God's grace, and goodness, and tenderness, and charity, I was so overcome with the thought of my own unworthiness to love such a one as you, that"—

"Oh no, no; for God's sake, do not say that—do not say that," she cried, holding out her hands to him in an appealing attitude. "Alas! alas! that word love must never pass between us."

"Why should not the word pass, when my heart and soul"—

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"Ah, let me implore of you. I fancied that you knew all—all my story. I forgot that it happened so long ago that people in this neighbourhood had ceased to speak of it years before you came here."

"Your story? I will believe nothing but what is good of you."

"My story—my life's story is that I have promised to love another man."

He gave a gasp. His head fell forward for a moment. Then he clasped his hands behind him and looked at her in all tenderness and without a suggestion of reproach.

"I had a suspicion of it yesterday," he said. "The man who is more fortunate than I is Richard Westwood."

"No, not Richard Westwood, but Claude Westwood," she replied, in a low tone, and with her eyes fixed upon the ground.

A puzzled look was on his face.

"Claude Westwood—Claude Westwood?" he said. "But there is no Claude Westwood. Was not Claude Westwood the African explorer killed years ago—it must be nearly ten years ago—when trying to reach the Upper Zambesi?"

"Claude Westwood is the man to whom I have given my promise," said she in an unshaken voice —the voice of one whose faith remains unshaken. "He is not dead. He is alive and our love lives. Ah, my dear friend"—she put out both her hands

frankly to Sir Percival and he took them, tenderly and reverently—"my dear friend, you may think me a fool; you may think that I am wasting my life in waiting for an event that is as impossible as the bringing of the dead back to life; but God has brought the dead back to life, and I trust in God to bring the man whom I love back to my love. At any rate, whatever you may think, I cannot help myself; it is my life, this waiting, though it is weary—weary."

She had turned away from him and was looking with wide, wistful eyes across the long sweep of country that lay between the road and the Abbey woods.

He had not let go her hands. He held them as he said:

"My poor Agnes! my poor Agnes. I had some hope—yes, a little—when I first saw you. I had never thought of loving a woman before, but then . . . ah, what is the good of recalling what my thoughts were—my hopes? I am strong enough to face my fate. I am strong enough to hope with all my heart that happiness may come to you—that—that—he may come to you—the man who is blessed with such a love as has blessed few men. You know that I am sincere, Agnes?"

"I am sure of it," she said, and now it was her hand that tightened on his. "Ah, my dear, dear friend, I know how good you are—how true! If I

were in trouble it is to you I would go for help, knowing that you would never fail me."

"I will never fail you," he said. "There is a bond between us. You will come to me should you ever be in trouble."

"I give you my promise," she said.

Her eyes were overflowing with tears as she put her face up to his. He kissed her on the forehead very gently, and without speaking a good-bye turned slowly away to the little gate.

While he was in the act of unlocking it, he started, hearing a cry from the spot where they had been standing a dozen yards away.

He looked round quickly.

Agnes was being supported by a servant. He saw that her face was deathly white, and in her hand that fell limply by her side there was an oblong piece of paper. A telegraph envelope had fluttered to the ground.

He rushed back to her.

"What has happened?" he asked the servant.

"A telegram, sir; I brought it out to her—it had just come, and I knew that she was out here. She read it and cried out—I was just in time to catch her. I don't think she has quite fainted, Sir Percival."

The maid was right. Agnes had not fainted, but she was plainly overcome by whatever news the telegram had conveyed to her.

She opened her eyes as Sir Percival put his arm about her, supporting her to a garden chair that stood at the side of the tennis lawn.

"I think I can walk," she murmured; and she made an effort to step out, but all her strength seemed to have departed. She would have fallen if Sir Percival had not supported her.

"You are weak," he said; "but after a rest you will be yourself again. Let me help you."

"You are so good!" she said, and with his help she was able to take a few steps. But then she gave a sudden gasp and became rigid when she caught sight of the telegram which was crumpled in her hand. She raised it slowly and stared at it. Then she cried out:

"Ah, God is good—God is good! It is no dream. He is safe—safe! Claude Westwood is alive."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT were his feelings as he read the telegram which she thrust into his hand—the telegram sent to her by a relative, who lived in London, acquainting her with the fact that an enterprising London paper had in its issue of that morning announced the safe arrival at Uganda of the distinguished explorer, Claude Westwood? "Authority unquestionable," were the words with which the telegram ended.

Had he for one single moment an unworthy thought? Had he for a single moment a consciousness that she was lost to him for ever? Had he a feeling that he was being cruelly treated by Fate? Or was every feeling overwhelmed by the thought that this woman whose happiness was dear to him, was on her way to happiness?

She was leaning upon him as he read the telegram; and when he looked into her face he saw that the expression which it wore was not that of a woman who is thinking of her own happiness. He saw that her heart was not so full of her own happiness as to have no place for a thought for the man who in a moment had all hope swept away from him. Her eyes showed him that she had the tenderest regard for him at that moment;

and that was how he was able to press her hand and say:

"With all my heart—with all my heart, I am glad. You will be happy. I ask nothing more."

She returned the pressure of his hand, and with her eyes looking into his, said in a low voice:

"I know it—I know it."

As he helped her to walk up to the house she kept putting question after question to him. Was the news that this paper published usually of a trustworthy character? She had heard that some newspapers with a reputation for enterprise to maintain, were usually more anxious to maintain such a reputation than one for scrupulous accuracy. Would Claude Westwood's brother be likely to receive a telegram to the same effect as hers, and if so, how was it that Dick had not come to her at once? Could it be that he questioned the accuracy of the news and was waiting until he had it confirmed by direct communication with Zanzibar before coming to her? And if Dick doubted the authentic nature of the message, was there not more than a possibility that there was some mistake in it? She knew all the systems of communication between Central Africa and the coast, she did not require any further information on that point; and she was aware of the ease with which an error could be made in a name or an incident between Uganda and Zanzibar.

Before she reached the house, the confidence

which she had had in the accuracy of the message had vanished. With every step she took, a fresh doubt arose in her mind; so that when she threw herself down in the seat at the porch she was tremulous with excitement.

What could he say to soothe her? She knew far more than he did about the romance of African exploration, and being aware of this fact, he felt that it would be ridiculous for him to refer to the many cases there had been of explorers reappearing suddenly after years of hopeless silence. She was more fully acquainted than he was with the incidents connected with these cases of the lost being found. All that he could do was to assure her that no first-class newspaper, however anxious it might be to maintain a reputation for enterprise, would wilfully concoct such an item of news as that of which Agnes held the summary in her hand. It was perfectly clear that the newspaper had good reason for publishing in an authoritative manner the news of the safety of Claude Westwood, otherwise the words "Authority unquestionable" would not have been used in transmitting the substance of the intelligence.

This Sir Percival pointed out to her; and then, after a few moments of thought, Agnes rose from her seat, not without an effort, and announced her intention of going to Westwood Court.

"Dick cannot have received the news or he would

surely be with me now," she said. "Ah, what will he think of it? He never gave up hope. Everything he said to me helped to strengthen my hope. You have heard how attached he and Claude were?"

Sir Percival, seeing how excited she had become —how she alternated between the extremes of hope and fear, dissuaded her from her intention of going to the Court at once.

"You must have some rest," he said. "The strain of going to the Court would be too much for you. You must not run the chance of breaking down when you need most to be strong. You will let me do this for you. I will see Westwood myself, whether he is at the Court or at the bank, and bring him to you."

"I am sure you are right, my dear friend," she said. "Oh yes, it is far better for you to bring him here. I cannot understand why Cyril has not come down yet. He should be the one to go. But you do not mind the trouble?"

"Trouble!" he said, and then laughed. "Trouble!"

He had gone some way down the drive when she called him back. She had left the porch of the house, and was standing against the trellis-work over which a rose was climbing. He returned to her at once.

"Listen to me, Sir Percival," she said in a curious

voice. "You are not to join with Dick in any compromise in regard to the news. If he believes that the report of Claude's safety is not to be trusted, you are to say so to me: it will not be showing your regard for me if you come back saying something to lessen the blow that Dick's doubt of the accuracy of the news will be to me. You will be treating me best if you tell me word for word what he says."

"You may trust me," he said quietly.

His heart was full of pity for her, for he could without difficulty see that she was in a perilous condition of excitement.

"I will trust you—oh, have I not trusted you?" she cried. "I do not want to live in a Fool's Paradise—Heaven only knows if I have not been living there during the past years. Paradise? No, it cannot be called a Paradise, for in no Paradise can there be the agony of waiting that was mine. And now —now—ah, do you think that I shall have an hour of Paradise till you return with the truth?—the truth, mind—that is what I want."

He went away without speaking a word of reply to her. What would be the good of saying anything to a woman in her condition? She had all the sympathy of his heart. As he went along the road to the Court he began to wonder how it was that he had not guessed long ago that the life of this woman was not as the life of other women. It

seemed to have occurred to no one in the neighbourhood to tell him what was the life that Miss Mowbray had chosen to live—that life of waiting and waiting through the long years. He supposed that her story had lost its interest for such persons as he had met during the year that he had been in Brackenshire; or they had not fancied that it would ever become of such intense interest to him as it was on this morning of June sunshine and singing birds and fleecy clouds and sweet scents of meadow grass and flower-beds.

He was conscious of a curious feeling of indignation in regard to the man who had been cruel enough to take from that woman her promise to love him, and him only, and then to leave her to waste her life away in waiting for him. He fancied he could picture her life during the years that Claude Westwood had been absent, and he felt that he had a right to be indignant with a man who had been selfish enough to bind a woman to himself with such a bond. Of course most women would, he knew, not consider such a bond binding upon them after a year or two: they would have been faithful to the man for a year—perhaps some of the most devoted might have been faithful for as long as eighteen months after his departure from England, and the extremely conscientious ones for six months after he had been swallowed up in the blackness of that black continent. They would not have been content to

live the life that had been Agnes Mowbray's—the life of waiting and hoping with those alternate intervals of despair.

The man had behaved cruelly toward her, for he should have known that she was not as other women. It was the feeling that the man was not worthy of her that caused Sir Percival Hope his only misgiving. He wondered if he himself had chanced to meet Agnes before she had known Claude Westwood, what would her life have been—what would his life have been?

He stood in the road and tried to form a picture of their life—of their lives joined together so as to make one life.

He hurried on. The picture was too bright to be looked upon. He found it easier to think of the picture which had been before his eyes when he had looked back hearing her voice calling him—the picture of a beautiful pale woman, with one hand leaning on the trellis-work of the porch, while the roses drooped down to her hair.

"The cruelty of it—the cruelty of it!" he groaned, as he hurried on to perform his mission.

And these were the very words that Agnes Mowbray was moaning at the same instant, as she fell on her knees beside the sofa in her dressing-room. This was all the prayer that her lips could frame at that moment.

"The cruelty of it! The cruelty of it!" That

was the result of all her thoughts of the past years that she had spent in waiting.

She and God knew what those years had been—the years that had robbed her of her youth, that had planted those grey hairs where the soft brown had been. All the past seemed unfolded in front of her like a scroll. She thought of her parting from her lover on that chill October day, when every breeze sent the leaves flying in crisp flakes through the air. Not a tear did she shed while she was saying that farewell to him. She had carried herself bravely—yes, as she stood beside the privet hedge and waved her hand to him on the road on which he was driving to catch the train; but when she had returned to the house and her father had put his arm round her, she was not quite so self-possessed. Her tears came in a torrent all at once, and she cried out for him to come back to her.

He had not come back to her. Through the long desolate years that had been her cry; but he had not come back to her. Oh! the desolation of those years that followed! At first she had received many letters from him. So long as he was in touch with some form of civilisation, however rudimentary it was, he had written to her; but then the letters became few and irregular. He could only trust that one out of every six that he wrote would reach her, he said, for he only wrote on the chance of meeting an elephant-hunter or a slave-raider going to the

coast who would take a letter for him—for a consideration. She had not the least objection to receive a letter, even though it had been posted by the red hand of the half-caste slave-raider.

But afterwards the letters ceased altogether. She tried to find courage in the reflection that the rascally men who had been entrusted with the letters had flung them away, or perhaps they had been killed or had died naturally before reaching the coast. Only for a time did she find some comfort in thus accounting for the absence of all news regarding him. At the end of a year she read in a newspaper an article in which the writer assumed that all hope for the safety of Claude Westwood had been abandoned. The writer of the article was clearly an expert in African exploration. He was ready to quote instance after instance since the days of Hanno, of explorers who had dared too much and had been cut off—some by what he called the legitimate enemies of pioneers, namely, disease and privation, others by that cruelty which has its habitation in the dark places of the earth, and nowhere in greater abundance than in the dark places of the Dark Continent.

She recollected what her feelings had been as she read that article and scores of other articles, dealing with the disappearance of Claude Westwood. She had not broken down. Her father had pointed out to her the extraordinary mistakes so easily made by

the experts who wrote on the subject of Claude Westwood's disappearance; and if they were able to bring forward instances of the loss of intrepid men who had set out in the hope of adding to the world's knowledge of the world, the Admiral was able to give quite as many instances of the safe return of explorers who had been given up for lost. Thus she and her father kept up each other's hopes until the question of Claude's safety ceased to be even alluded to in the press as a topic of the day.

She had never lost hope; but this fact did not prevent her having dreams of the night. She was accustomed to awake with a cry, seeing him tortured by savages—seeing him lying alone in a country where no tree was growing. And then she would remain awake through the long night, praying for his safety.

That had been her life for years, and now she was still praying for his safety—praying that the day of the realisation of her hopes had at last come.

She started up, hearing the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. She was at her window in time to see Sir Percival in the act of entering the porch. He had not been long absent. He could not have had a long conversation with Richard Westwood.

She met him while he was still in the porch. They stood face to face for a few moments, but no word came from either of them for a long time. She seemed to think that she was about to fall, for

she put out a hand to the velvet portière that hung in an arch leading to the hall—that was her right hand—her left was pressed against her heart.

"You need not speak," she whispered, when they had stood face to face in that long silence. "You need not speak. I know all that your silence implies."

"No—no—you know nothing of what I have to tell you," said he slowly.

"What have you to tell? Can you tell me anything worse than that Claude Westwood is dead?"

"It is not Claude Westwood who is dead."

"Not Claude?—who—who, then, is dead?"

"Richard Westwood is dead."

CHAPTER VIII.

SHE continued looking at him after he had spoken, as though she failed to grasp the meaning of his words. It seemed as if they conveyed nothing definite to her.

"I don't think I heard you aright, Sir Percival," she said at last. "There was no question of Richard Westwood's being alive or dead. You went to find out about Claude."

"I went to find out about Claude, but I did not get further than the lodge," said Sir Percival. "At the lodge I heard what had happened. It is a terrible thing! The events of the day must have affected him more deeply than we imagined they would."

"You mean to tell me that Dick—that Richard Westwood is dead?" said Agnes.

"He died this morning."

"Dead! But I was with him yesterday. My brother Cyril dined with him last night."

"I tell you it is a terrible thing. Poor fellow! His mind must have given way beneath the strain that the run upon the bank entailed upon him. Dear Agnes, let me help you to reach your chair. Pray lean on me."

She did not seem to hear what he had said. She was dazed but striving to recover herself.

"I cannot understand," she said. "It appears strange that I cannot understand when you have spoken quite plainly. But we were talking about Claude—not Dick. You were to find out what Dick thought regarding the rumour of Claude's being alive—so far I am quite clear. But here you come to me saying: 'It is Dick Westwood and not Claude who is dead.' What on earth can you mean by saying that, when all I wanted to know was about Claude?"

"My dear Agnes, I can say nothing more. This second shock is too much for you. In a few minutes, however, you will be able to realise what has happened. Where is your brother? I must speak to him."

"No—no; do not leave me. If he is dead—and you say that he is dead—I have no friend in the world but you. Ah, you must not leave me. I do not think I have any one in the world but you."

She spoke in a tone of pitiful entreaty, holding out both her hands to him, as she had done once in the garden.

He took her hands and held them for a moment, but he did not press them, as another man might have done, when she had spoken. He said gently:

"I will not leave you—whatever may happen I will be by your side. Now you will sit down."

He had just helped her to one of the chairs that stood in the porch, when the portière was flung

aside, and Cyril, in the act of lighting a cigarette, appeared.

"Hallo, Agnes, I'm a bit late, I suppose," he began, but seeing Sir Percival helping her as though she were as feeble as an invalid, to the chair, he stopped short. "What's the matter, Sir Percival?" he said, in another tone, but not one of great concern.

"Tell him—tell him; perhaps he will understand," said Agnes, looking up to Sir Percival's face.

"You do not mind my speaking to him for a minute in the garden?" said Sir Percival.

"Go; perhaps he will understand," said she.

He held up a finger to Cyril, and they went outside together.

"What's the mystery now?" asked Cyril, picking up his straw hat from a chair. "I shouldn't wonder if it had something to do with Claude Westwood. My poor sister is overcome because she has received confirmation of his death probably. But you and I know, Sir Percival, that there has not been the smallest chance."

"I do not want to talk to you about Claude Westwood just at this minute, but about his brother," said Sir Percival. "The fact is, that I have just returned from the Court. The dead body of Richard Westwood was found by a gardener this morning not twenty yards from his house. He had shot himself with a revolver."

Cyril turned very pale, but the cigarette that he was smoking did not drop from his lips. He stared at Sir Percival for some moments, and then slowly removed his cigarette. He drew a long breath before saying in a whisper:

"Shot himself? Then he was bankrupt after all, and Agnes's money is gone. Why the mischief did you give her that cheque yesterday, Sir Percival?"

"I thought it well that you should hear this terrible news at once," said Sir Percival, ignoring his question. "I believe that you dined with him last night, and so you were probably the last person to see him alive. You will most certainly be questioned by the Chief Constable before the inquest."

"The Chief Constable or any other constable may question me; I don't mind. I don't suppose it will be suggested that I shot poor Dick," said Cyril, somewhat jauntily.

Sir Percival made no reply, and Cyril went on.

"Good heavens! Poor old Dick! I'm sorry for him. I have good reason to be sorry. He was the best friend I had. He understood me. He wasn't too hard on a chap like me. The people in this neighbourhood think that I'm a bad egg—you probably think so too, Sir Percival; but poor Dick never joined with the others in boycotting me, though he knew more about me than any of them! And to think that all the time he was playing that game of

billiards—all the time he was crossing the park with me when I was going home, he meant to put an end to himself."

"You will probably be asked some questions on this point by the Chief Constable," said Sir Percival. "He will ask you if you can testify to his state of mind last evening. You drove back with him from the bank, I believe?"

"I drove back with him, and dined with him. We had a game of billiards, the same as usual, and then he walked across the park with me, as I say. That's all I have to tell. I know nothing about his condition of mind; but he admitted to me more than once that he had had rather a bad time of it while those fools were in the bank clamouring for their money—it appears that they weren't such great fools after all. Poor old Dick! He took me up quite seriously when I suggested that he should marry Agnes. He pretended to believe that Claude was still alive, as if he didn't know as well as you or I, Sir Percival"—

"There is every likelihood that Claude Westwood is alive," said Sir Percival.

"What—Claude Westwood alive and Dick Westwood dead?" cried Cyril. "Pardon me if I seem rude, Sir Percival, but what on earth are you talking about?"

"I have told you all that I know," said Sir Percival. "Your sister got a telegram an hour ago

telling her that a London newspaper contains a piece of exclusive news regarding Claude Westwood, and the information is described as accurate beyond question."

"Great Scott!" said Cyril after a pause. "What's the meaning of this, anyway? One brother turns up alive and well after being lost in Africa for eight years, and the other—Good heavens! What can any one say when things like that are occurring under our very eyes? Why couldn't Dick have waited until the news came? He would not have shot himself if he had known that Claude was alive, I'll swear. And as for Claude—well, when he gets the news from Brackenhurst, he'll be inclined to wish that he had remained in the interior."

"They were so deeply attached to each other?"

"Well, of course, Sir Percival, I can't say anything about that from my own recollection, but every one about here says they were like David and Jonathan—like Damon and the other chap. Nothing ever came between them—not even a woman; and I need hardly tell you, Sir Percival, that the appearance of the woman is usually the signal for"—

"Here is Major Borrowdaile," said Sir Percival, interrupting the outburst of cynical philosophy on the part of the youth, as a dog-cart driven by Major Borrowdaile, the Chief Constable of the county, passed through the entrance gates.

Cyril allowed himself to be interrupted without a protest. His nonchalance vanished as the officer jumped from the dog-cart and went across the lawn to him. Sir Percival took a few steps to meet Major Borrowdaile, but Cyril did not move.

"You have heard of this nasty business, Sir Percival?" said the officer.

"I have just come from the lodge at the Court," replied Sir Percival. "There's no possibility of a mistake being made, I suppose? It is certain that Mr. Westwood shot himself."

"It is certain that the poor fellow was found shot through the lungs," said the Chief Constable cautiously. "I hear that you dined with him last night, Mowbray," he continued, turning to Cyril. "That is why I have troubled you with a visit."

"Why should you come to me?" said Cyril, almost plaintively. "I dined with Dick Westwood, and parted from him at the road gate before midnight. That's all I know about the business."

"That means you were the last person to see him alive. He must have been shot on returning to the house after letting you through the road gate."

"Must have been shot?" cried Cyril. "Why, you said he had shot himself, Sir Percival."

"He was found with a revolver close to his hand," said Major Borrowdaile, "and the undergardener, who discovered the body, took it for

granted that he had committed suicide. You see the fact that there was a run upon the bank yesterday induces some people to jump to the conclusion that he committed suicide, just as the assumption that he committed suicide will lead many people to assume that the affairs of the bank are in an unsatisfactory condition. They are bad logicians. Did he seem at all depressed in the course of the evening, Mowbray?"

"Not he," replied Cyril. "He was just the opposite. He ate a first-class dinner, and we discussed the fools who made the run upon the bank. It seems that they weren't such fools after all—so I've been saying to Sir Percival."

"You are another of the imperfect logicians," said Major Borrowdaile. "I want facts—not deductions, if you please. If there are to be any deductions made I prefer making them myself. I promise you that I shall make them on a basis of fact. Dr. Mitford saw our poor friend, and he has had, as you know, a large experience of bullet wounds—he went through four campaigns—and he declares that it is quite impossible that Mr. Westwood could have shot himself. The bullet entered the lungs from behind. Now, men who wish to commit suicide do not shoot themselves in that way. They have the best of reasons for refraining. That is fact number one. Fact number two is that the revolver which was found at his

hand was not Mr. Westwood's—his own revolver was found safe in his own bedroom."

"Then the deduction is simple," said Sir Percival. "Some one must have shot him."

"I am afraid that is the only conclusion one can come to, considering the facts which I have placed before you, Sir Percival," said Major Borrowdaile. "This view is strengthened by Mowbray's testimony as to the condition of Mr. Westwood last night: he was not depressed nor had he any reason to be depressed, the run upon the bank having been successfully averted."

"But who could have borne him a grudge? He was, I have always believed, the most popular man in the neighbourhood," said Sir Percival.

The Chief Constable glanced toward Cyril saying:

"Perhaps Mowbray here will be able to give us at least a clue."

"I?—I know nothing of the matter," said Cyril. "I have told you all that I know. We parted at the gate in the wall of the park—it saves me a round of more than half a mile—that's all I know, I assure you."

"Then I'm disappointed in my mission to you," said the Chief Constable. "The fact is that one of the servants came to us with a singular story of a visitor—a man wearing a rather shabby coat and a soft hat. He says he entered the room when this man was having an altercation with Mr. West-

wood, at which you were present, and the revolver"—

"Great Scott!" cried Cyril. "How could I be such an idiot as to forget that! The man came into the drawing-room through the open window, and called Dick a swindler. He pulled out a revolver and covered Dick with it just as the servant entered the room. Dick took the matter very coolly and the fellow threw the revolver out of the window, and walked out by the door himself —but not before he had threatened Dick. Oh, there can be no doubt about it; the shot was fired by that man."

"Did he mention what was his name?" asked Major Borrowdaile.

"He did—yes, he said his name was—now what the mischief did he say it was? Stanley?—no—Stanmore?—I think he said his name was Stanmore. No. I have it now—Standish; and he mentioned that he had just come from Midleigh. Oh, there's no doubt that he fired the shot. Why on earth haven't you tried to arrest him? He can't have gone very far as yet."

"He was arrested half an hour ago," said the Chief Constable.

"Heavens above! He didn't run away?" cried Cyril.

"On the contrary, he walked straight into the bank the first thing this morning, and tried to

make a row because the cashier hadn't arrived," said Major Borrowdaile. "He waited there, and when the news came that Mr. Westwood was dead and the doors of the bank were about to be closed, he refused to leave the premises. That was where he made a mistake; for he was arrested by my sergeant on suspicion, though the sergeant had heard that Mr. Westwood had shot himself. And yet we hear that there is no intelligence apart from Scotland Yard!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE London evening papers were full of the name of Westwood, and the pleasant little country town of Brackenhurst was during the afternoon overrun with representatives of the Press, the majority of whom were, to the amazement of the legitimate inhabitants, far more anxious to obtain some items relating to the personal history—the more personal the better—of Claude Westwood, than to become acquainted with the local estimate of the character of his brother. The people of the neighbourhood could not understand how it was possible that the world should regard the reappearance of a distinguished explorer after an absence of eight years with much greater interest than the murder of a provincial banker—even supposing that Mr. Westwood was murdered, which was to place the incident of his death in the most favourable light—from the standpoint of those newspapers that live by sensational headlines.

The next morning every newspaper worthy of the name had a leading article upon the Westwoods, and pointed out how the tragic elements associated with the death of one of the brothers were intensified by the fact that if he had only lived for a few hours longer, he would have heard of the

safety of his distinguished brother, to whom he was deeply attached. While almost every newspaper contained half a column telling the story—so far as it was known—of the supposed murder of Richard Westwood, a far greater space was devoted to the story of the escape of Claude Westwood from the savages of the Upper Zambesi, who had killed every member of his expedition and had kept him in captivity for eight years.

The people of Brackenhurst could not understand such a lapse of judgment on the part of the chief newspaper editors: they were, of course, very proud of the fact that Claude Westwood was a Brackenshireman, but they were far prouder of the distinction of being associated with the locality of a murder about which every one in the country was talking.

Cyril Mowbray found himself suddenly advanced to a position of unlooked-for prominence, owing to the amount of information he was able to give to the newspaper men regarding the scene during the run on the bank, and the scene in the drawing-room at the Court, when the man who called himself Standish had entered, demanding the money which he had lodged the previous year in Westwoods' bank. Only once before had Cyril found himself in a position of equal prominence, and that was when he had been finally sent down at Oxford for participating in a prank of such a character as

caused the name of his college to appear in every newspaper for close upon a week under the heading of "The University Scandal." Before the expiration of that week Cyril's name was in the mouth of every undergraduate, and he felt, for the remainder of the week, all the gratification which is the result (sometimes) of a sudden accession to a position of prominence after a long period of comparative obscurity.

But his sister Agnes was completely prostrated by what had now happened—by the gladness of hearing that her lover was safe—that her long years of watching and waiting had not been in vain, and by the grief of knowing that her gladness could not be shared by Dick Westwood. It seemed to her that her hour of grief had swallowed up her hour of joy. She could not look forward to the delight of meeting Claude once again without feeling that her triumph—the triumph of her constancy—was robbed of more than half its pleasure, since it could not be shared by poor Dick. A week ago the news that her lover was safe would have thrilled her with delight; but now it seemed to her a barren joy even to anticipate his return: she knew that he would never recover from the blow of his brother's death —she knew that all the love she might lavish upon him would not diminish the bitterness of the thoughts that would be his when he returned to the Court and found it desolate.

She read with but the smallest amount of interest the newspaper articles that eulogised Claude Westwood and his achievements. She seemed to have but an impersonal connection with the discoveries that he had made—suggestions of their magnitude appeared almost daily in the newspapers; and the fact that an enterprising publishing firm in England had sent out a special emissary to meet him at Zanzibar with an offer of £25,000 for his book—it was taken as a matter of course that he would write a book—interested her no more than did the information that an American lecture bureau had cabled to their English agent to make arrangements with him for a series of lectures—it was assumed that he would give a course of lectures with limelight views—in the States, his remuneration to be on a scale such as only a prima donna had ever dreamt of, and that only in her most avaricious moments. She even remained unmoved by the philosophical reflection indulged in by several leader writers, to the effect that, after all, it would seem that the perils surrounding an ordinary English gentleman were greater than those encompassing the most intrepid of explorers in the most dangerous sphere of exploration in the world.

The foundation for this philosophy was, of course, the coincidence of the news being published confirmatory of the safety of one of the Westwoods on the same page that contained the melancholy

story of what was soon termed the Brackenshire Tragedy.

And this melancholy story did not lose anything of its tragic aspect when it came to be investigated before the usual tribunals. But however interesting as well as profitable it might be to give at length an account of the questions put to the witnesses at the inquest, and the answers given by them to the solicitors engaged in the investigation, such interest and profit must be foregone in this place. A reader will have to be content with the information of the bare fact that the coroner's jury returned a verdict of "Wilful Murder" against the man who had, under the name of Carton Standish, lodged some hundreds of pounds the previous year in the Westwoods' bank, and who, according to the evidence of Cyril, corroborated by the footman, had threatened Mr. Westwood with a revolver.

Cyril described the incidents of the entire interview that Standish had with Mr. Westwood, up to the point of his throwing the revolver out of the window. He was not, of course, prepared to say that the revolver which was found at Mr. Westwood's hand (deposed to by the under-gardener) was the same weapon, but he said that it seemed to him to be the same. He had not seen the man pick up the revolver from the grass where it had fallen. The man had left the house, not by the window, by which he had entered, but by the hall door. In

reply to a question put to him Cyril said that if the revolver had been left on the grass it might have been picked up by any one aware of the fact that it was there. Neither he nor Mr. Westwood had picked it up. They had not walked together in the direction of the Italian garden, but through the park, which was on the other side of the house. They had not discussed the incident of the man's entering the drawing-room, except for a few minutes, nor did it seem to occur to Mr. Westwood that he might be in jeopardy were he to walk through the grounds. He appeared to disregard the man's threats.

The surgeon who had examined the body gave a horribly technical description of the wound made by the bullet, and said he had no hesitation in swearing that the revolver was fired from a distance of at least twenty feet from the deceased. He had a wide experience of bullet wounds, but it did not need a wide experience to enable a surgeon to pronounce an opinion as to whether or not a wound had been produced by a point-blank discharge of a weapon, whether revolver or rifle.

Major Borrowdaile and the police sergeant gave some evidence regarding the arrest of Standish, and the butler, who was the first to enter the drawing-room in the morning, stated that he had found the French window open. He fancied that his master had gone out for a stroll before breakfast. He also said that he had heard in the early part of the

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night the sound of several shots; but he had taken it for granted that a party were shooting rabbits in the warren. In any case the sound of a shot at night in the park or the shrubberies would not cause alarm among the servants: they would take it for granted that a keeper had fired at one of the wild-cats or perhaps at a night-hawk, or some creature of the woods inimical to the young pheasants.

This was considered sufficient evidence by the coroner's jury, and the man was handed over, to be formally committed by the bench of magistrates.

The Summer Assizes were held within a fortnight, and then, in addition to the evidence previously given, a gunmaker from Midleigh swore that the revolver was purchased from him by the prisoner on the forenoon of the day when he had appeared at Westwood Court. Against such evidence the statement of the landlord of the Three Swans Inn at Brackenhurst, to the effect that he had admitted the prisoner to the inn at a few minutes past midnight—the only direct evidence brought forward for the defence—was of no avail. The landlord, on being cross-examined, admitted that his clock was not invariably to be depended on: on the night in question he took it for granted that it was a quarter of an hour fast. He would not swear that it was not customary to set it back on the very day of the week corresponding to that preceding the

discovery of the dead body of Mr. Westwood. He also declined to swear that the next day the clock was not found to be accurate.

The judge upon this occasion was not the one whose anxiety to sentence men and women to be hanged is so great that he has now and again practically insisted on a jury returning a verdict of guilty against prisoners who, on being reprieved by the Home Secretary, were eventually found to be entirely innocent of the crime laid to their charge. Nor was he the one whose unfortunate infirmity of deafness prevents his hearing more than a word or two of the evidence. He was not even the one whose inability to perceive the difference between immorality and criminality is notorious. He was the one whose ingenuity is made apparent by his suggestion of certain possibilities which have never occurred to the counsel engaged in a case.

When it seemed to be quite certain that Standish would be found guilty, the judge began to perplex the minds of the jurymen by suggestions of his own. He pointed out that the prisoner had had but one object in threatening Mr. Westwood—namely, to recover the money that he had lodged in Westwoods' bank; and this being so, what motive would he have for murdering Mr. Westwood until he had applied to the bank and had had his money refused to him?

So far from his having a motive in killing Mr.

Westwood, and then placing the weapon so close to his hand as to suggest that he had committed suicide, he had the very best reason for preventing the spread of the report that the proprietor of the bank had committed suicide, for it would be perfectly plain to any one that the spread of such a report would cause it to be taken for granted that the affairs of the bank were in a shaky condition, and the bank might stop payment in self-defence; in which case the prisoner must have known that his money would be in serious jeopardy.

He then went on to point out how no evidence had been brought forward to prove that the prisoner had ever regained possession of the revolver after he had thrown it out of the window, so that it was open for any one who might have found the weapon, to use it with deadly effect against Mr. Westwood, or, for that matter, against some one else. Finally, he ventured to point out how it was scarcely within the bounds of possibility that the murder could have been committed by any one except the prisoner. He trusted, however, that the jury would give the amplest consideration to the points upon which he had dwelt.

The result of this summing up was that it took the jury two hours and a half instead of five minutes to find the prisoner guilty. It only took the judge five minutes to sentence him, however; but those persons who had been looking forward to so

exciting an incident as an execution, with a black flag hoisted outside the gaol to stimulate the imagination in regard to the horror that was being enacted within, were disappointed, for the Home Secretary commuted the capital sentence to one of penal servitude for life.

The man's character had not been an unblemished one. Fifteen years before he had suffered eighteen months' imprisonment for fraud in connection with the floating of a company—a transaction into which it seems scarcely possible for fraud to enter—but since his return he appeared to have supported himself honorably at Midleigh. He had worked himself up to a position of trust at the great Midleigh brewery, and it was said that in addition to the few hundreds which remained to his credit in Westwoods' bank, he had saved some thousands of pounds. It appeared, however, that what he had said in Dick Westwood's drawing-room about having a wife and child, was untrue, for certainly no no one claiming to be his wife had come forward during the trial.

Thus, within three weeks of the tragedy at the Court, the people of Brackenhurst had begun to talk of other matters—during a fortnight no other topic was possible in the town. After Mr. Westwood's death there was no run on the bank: but even if there had been, plenty of gold would have been forthcoming to meet all demands. It was then that

the people began to discuss the probability of Mr. Westwood's having died a wealthy man, and the likelihood of his having made a will. They feared that Claude Westwood would not find himself better provided for than he had been at his father's death; for they took it for granted that his brother would have made his will on the assumption—the very reasonable assumption—that he was no longer alive.

It did not take long to satisfy the curiosity of the neighbourhood on all these points. Richard Westwood's lawyer produced in due course a will which the former had made the year before, and it became plain from this document that the testator was a wealthy man—that is to say, wealthy from the standpoint of Brackenshire; though, of course, in the estimation of Lancashire or Chicago the sums which he bequeathed represented a competency only one degree removed from absolute penury. Something like two hundred thousand pounds were distributed in the will, but the distribution was made on the simplest principle. After a few legacies of an unimportant character to some cousins, his clerks and servants, Richard Westwood left all his property in trust for his brother Claude, should the said Claude be found to be alive within five years from the date of the will. But should no proof be forthcoming that he was alive within that period, everything was to go to Agnes Louise Mowbray, of The Knoll, for her absolute use.

People opened their eyes when they became acquainted with the provisions of the will. So many years had passed since the departure of Claude Westwood, it was quite forgotten, except by a few persons, that there was a woman awaiting his return.

There were some people, however, who said that the character of Richard Westwood's will proved that he had been in love with Miss Mowbray. They never failed to add that they had suspected it all along.

CHAPTER X.

CYRIL MOWBRAY did not seem to feel quite as jubilant as he might have done, when it was proved beyond the possibility of doubt, that Claude was alive. The income that would be his when he reached the age of twenty-five was a small one, and quite insufficient to allow of his keeping three hunters and driving a coach, to say nothing of that two-hundred-ton yacht upon which he had set his heart.

He considered that he was, on the whole, very hardly dealt with by Fate, for he felt convinced that he was meant by Nature to be a country gentleman in affluent circumstances and without need to take thought for all the unlet farms that might be on his property. He considered it especially hard that he should be cheated out of his money—that was how he put it—by the reappearance of Claude. He had great confidence in his own ability to persuade his sister to part with her money. To whom should she give her money if not to her own brother, he inquired of such persons as he took into his confidence on the subject of his grievances.

His confidence in his capacity to get his sister's money into his possession was but too well-founded. During the year of idleness that followed

his being sent down from the University, he had been a terrible burden to Agnes, for it was in vain that she pleaded with him to seek to qualify himself for some employment in which a University degree was not necessary; he refused to listen to her, saying that he was fit for nothing but the life of a country gentleman.

That was certainly the life which he had led for a year, at his sister's expense. He was a great burden to her, but she was extremely fond of him, and she was a woman.

Lizzie Dangan had left the neighbourhood without revealing to any one the fact that she had had a secret interview with Mr. Westwood within twenty yards of where his body had been found in the morning, and also without being reconciled to her father, the gamekeeper, though Agnes made an attempt to get the man to forgive his daughter for her lapse. The man had always been a strict father, giving his children an excellent education, and insisting on their going to church with praiseworthy regularity. It was therefore mortifying for him to find that his two sons had enlisted in a cavalry regiment and that his one daughter had neglected the excellent precepts of life which he had taught her by the aid of a birch rod.

It was probably the sense of his own failure in regard to his children that made him refuse to be reconciled to Lizzie. He had shown himself all his

life to be a hard and morose man, discharging his duties with rigid exactness, and being quite intolerant of the lapses of the people about him. After the death of Mr. Westwood and the departure of his daughter, he became more morose than ever, scarcely speaking to any one on the estate, and rarely leaving the precincts of the park. Some of the servants said that, after all, he had been attached to Mr. Westwood, but others said that he was grieving because Lizzie had not been allowed to starve to death in expiation of her fault. He had more than once said that he hoped he would see her in her coffin for bringing shame upon his house, but until she was lying in her coffin he would not have her brought before him.

It was after her departure that Cyril began to feel a trifle lonely. He missed his stolen interviews with the girl, and above all he missed the sense of being engaged in an intrigue that was attended with the greatest risk, and which he flattered himself had been carried on without awaking the suspicions of any one, except his too considerate friend, Dick Westwood. Even the excitement of the trial and the consciousness of being a person of the greatest importance in connection with the case for the Crown, failed to compensate him for the absence of Lizzie, especially as, within a week after the conviction of Standish, the Crown no longer regarded him as a person of distinction. To be the

chief witness for the Crown had seemed in his eyes pretty much the same thing as to be on speaking terms with Royalty; and when he found himself, after he had served the purposes of the prosecution, cast aside in favour of a farm labourer, who became the hero of the moment because he had detected a man loitering in the neighbourhood of certain hay ricks that had been burnt down, he was ready to indulge in many philosophical reflections upon the fickleness of Royalty. He felt like the discarded favourite of a Prince.

Thus it was that he became an intolerable burden to his sister, and the subject of unfavourable predictions uttered by the most far-seeing people of the neighbourhood, although his worst enemies could not say that he was not improving at billiards. It was universally admitted that he was making satisfactory progress in the study of this fascinating game; a fact which shows that if one only practises for six hours a day at anything, one will, eventually, become proficient at it.

To say, however, that he was satisfied with his life and its prospects at this period would be impossible. As a matter of fact, he was as much dissatisfied with himself as his friends were. He had been heard once or twice to say something about enlisting.

It was just when he was actually considering if, in view of his failure to realise the simplest aspira-

tions of a country gentleman, it might not be well for him to take the Queen's shilling, that he met Sir Percival Hope on the road to Brackenhurst.

It seemed to him that Sir Percival had a lecture-reading expression on his face, and he quickened his pace with a view of passing him with a nod. But he was mistaken; first, in fancying that Sir Percival had so narrow a knowledge of the world as to think that lecture-reading was ever known to act as a brake upon any youth who had made up his mind to go to the bad; and secondly, in fancying that if such a man as Sir Percival Hope had made up his mind to speak to him, either with the intention of reading him a lecture or with any other aim, he would be able to pass him with only a nod of recognition.

Sir Percival stopped him.

"Look here, Mowbray," he said, "you're a man of the world, and you know all the people about here far better than I do. You see they freeze up when I want them to talk freely to me. I haven't the way of drawing them out that you have."

Cyril fairly blushed at these compliments; they were delivered in so casual a tone as to seem every-day truths that no one would dream of contradicting.

Cyril did not dream of contradicting them, though he did blush. He merely murmured that he supposed chaps would sooner give themselves away to him than to Sir Percival.

"Of course they would," acquiesced the elder man. "That is why I am glad to have met you. The fact is, that my chief overseer at Tarragonda Creek—that's one of my sheep stations in New South Wales—has written to me to send him out a young chap who would act as his assistant for a while—a chap whom he could eventually place in charge of one of the farms. Now why on earth he should bother me with this business I don't know, only that O'Gorman—that's the overseer—has a mortal hatred of the native-born Australian: he fancies that he knows too much. I was about to write to him to say that he must manage without me, when it occurred to me that you might be able to help me. What O'Gorman wants is a young fellow who is first and foremost a gentleman—a fellow who knows what a horse is and does not object to be in the saddle all day. If you hear of any one who you think would suit such a billet, I wish you would let me know—only remember, Mr. O'Gorman is a great believer in gentlemen for such posts: he won't have anything to do with stable hands who think to better themselves in a colony."

"Look here, Sir Percival," cried Cyril, after only a short pause, "I'm dead tired of life in this neighbourhood. I can hear people say, the moment my back is turned, that I'm going straight to the devil, and I can't contradict them. I am going to the devil simply because I thought I was good for noth-

ing but loafing about billiard-rooms. You don't know, Sir Percival, how far I have gone in that direction. Only one person knows what I am guilty of. But I haven't had a chance; and if you only give me one, you'll see if I don't take it."

"Do you mean to say that you'd take the situation yourself?" asked Sir Percival, as if the idea had been sprung upon him.

"I see by the way you ask me that you think I'm a conceited cub," said Cyril. "But I'm not conceited, and—look here, Sir Percival, give me this chance and it will mean the saving of me. You'll not regret it. I was just thinking as I came along here this evening, that there's nothing left for me except to enlist, and by the Lord Harry, if you won't take me I will enlist if only to get away from this place."

"My dear boy, you needn't hold that pistol to my head," said Sir Percival.

"A pistol—what pistol?" said Cyril, in a low tone, taking a step or two back and staring at Sir Percival.

"Why, that threat of enlisting. Why need you threaten me with that? I'll give you the chance you ask for without any intimidation. Heavens! If you only knew the relief that it is to me to be able to tell O'Gorman that I have got a man for him. Oh, you and he will get on all right. Of course you'll do just what he tells you, or you'll get your passage paid home by the next steamer."

"Sir Percival," faltered Cyril, "you've saved me."

And then, man of the world though he was, he burst into tears, and hurried away, leaving Sir Percival standing alone on the roadside extremely gratified by the reflection that once more he had been right in the estimate he had formed of a man's character, though all the people whom he had met had differed from him. It was this capacity to judge of men's characters without being guided by the opinions formed—and expressed—by others, that had made him a rich man while others had remained poor. He had come to the conclusion that Cyril was not in reality a *mauvais sujet*, or what is known in England as a bad egg. The philosophy of Sir Percival's life was comprised within these lines:

> "Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do."

He rather guessed that he could outwit Satan if he only set about trying to do it.

Thus it was that Agnes had to express her gratitude once again to Sir Percival Hope, and thus their friendship became consolidated.

Not once did Cyril put in an appearance at a billiard-room at Brackenhurst during the week that followed his interval with Sir Percival. He had no time for billiards, the fact being that he was made

to understand that he must be on his way to Australia by the steamer leaving England in ten days. For the first time in his life he felt it incumbent on him to rouse himself. He went up with Sir Percival to London to procure himself an outfit; and though it was something of a disappointment to him to learn that he was not to appear in top boots and a "picture hat," after a model made by a milliner in Bond Street, and worn by a South African trooper —he should have dearly liked to walk for the last time through the streets of Brackenhurst in this picturesque attire—still he bore his disappointment with resignation, and packed up his flannel shirts with a light heart. He wrote a letter to Lizzie Dangan on the eve of his departure, and only posted it at Liverpool half an hour before he embarked for his new home.

It was when he was beginning to feel, as the waves of the Channel were causing the big steamer some uneasiness, that, after all, he would not look on the acquisition of a yacht as an essential to his scheme of enjoying life when he had become a millionaire, that his sister Agnes was waited on by Dick Westwood's solicitor.

She had scarcely dried the tears which she had shed on thinking that her brother would be by this time at sea, for the reflection that even a reprobate brother is at sea will make a kind-hearted sister weep; and she did not feel much inclined to have

an interview which she feared would be a business one.

She soon found, however, that the solicitor had not come strictly on a matter of business.

"I bring you a letter which is addressed to my late client, Mr. Westwood," said he. "In the ordinary way of business, I have, of course, opened the few letters that have been addressed to him by persons whom the news of his death had not time to reach, but in this particular case I have brought the letter to you."

He handed her an envelope which was in such a condition as to suggest that it had been lying for a wet day or two in the roadway at Charing Cross or some thoroughfare equally well frequented, and that afterwards some one had dropped it by mistake into one of the iron dust-bins instead of a pillar-box. It was soiled and dilapidated to such an extent as made Agnes uncertain on which side the address was written. But she was able to read on a corner that had been scraped, the one postmark "Zanzibar."

The letter dropped from her hand.

"The pity of it—ah, the pity of it!" she cried.

"I will leave it with you, Miss Mowbray," said the lawyer, rising. "I think that it is into your hands it should be put. You will read it at your leisure, and if it contains any matter upon which you think I should be informed, you will be good enough to communicate with me."

CHAPTER XI.

For some time after the lawyer had left the house, the letter lay unheeded at Agnes's feet. She could only say to herself, "The pity of it! The pity of it!" as her eyes overflowed with tears. It seemed very pitiful to her to see lying there the letter which the man to whom it was addressed would never see. She thought of the gladness which receiving that letter would have brought into the life that had passed away. Not for a single moment did she feel jealous because it had arrived in England unaccompanied by any letter to herself. She felt that it was fitting that the first letter written by Claude since his return to civilisation—such civilisation as was represented by the sending and receiving of letters—should be to the brother whom he loved so well.

It was some time before she could take it up and open the cover. When at last she did so, standing at the window leading into her garden to catch all the light that remained in the sky, she failed to detect any but the most distant resemblance in the handwriting to Claude's, as she had known it. But as she read the first words her tears began to flow once more, and she could only press the letter to

her lips and say, "Thank God, thank God, for allowing me to see his handwriting once more!"

The letter was not a long one. The writer assumed that his brother would think that he was reading a message from another world. "And by Heaven you won't be so far wrong, old boy," he wrote, "for I don't suppose any human being ever went so near as I did to the border-line of that undiscovered country without passing over into the land of shadows."

He then went on to give a brief sketch of the massacre of all the members of the expedition with the exception of himself, and to tell how he had been not merely held in captivity by the strange tribes whom they had met, but promoted to the position of a god by them, owing to the accident of his having found his way into a sacred cave, after taking the precaution to knock out the brains of the two witch doctors who had previously killed every native who had attempted to enter. The position of a god he found great difficulty in living up to, he said, for the gods of that nation were carefully guarded lest they should make a try for the liberty of an ordinary layman.

In short, the letter gave a *résumé* of the writer's terrible hardships when living as the captive of one of the most barbarous of African savage tribes. For nearly eight years he had lived as a savage, and when at last he contrived to escape, he had

spent another six months wandering from forest to forest of the interior, in almost a naked condition, and with no weapon except a knife, which had once belonged to Baines, the explorer, and had been given by him to a friendly native when painting the falls of the Zambesi. When at the point of starving he had been fortunate enough to come in contact with an ivory hunter on his way to Uganda, where they had arrived together.

"If you only knew the difficulty I have in holding a pen you would give me unlimited praise for writing so long a letter instead of confounding me —as I fear you will—for being so brief. The chap who takes this to the coast for me will not fail to make as much as he can out of my story for transmission to the papers, so that the chances are that you will have got plenty of news about me by cable a fortnight or so before you get this."

The writer did not indulge in any more sentimental passages than may be found in the letter of any average Englishman who writes to a brother after taking part in a campaign in a distant country, or fighting his way through savages in the hope of opening up a new land for English trade—and occasionally German.

Only as a postscript he had written:

"I often wonder what you are like now. Of course you have found a wife who adores you, and your children have been told that they once had an

uncle who went out to Africa and was killed by men with black on their faces, and if they aren't good children the black men will eat them up too. Well, now you will have to untell all that you have told those innocent little ones, if they exist; and I'm afraid that you'll have to invent another path to virtue than that presided over by the black men.

"By the way, I take it for granted that Agnes Mowbray has followed the example which I assume you have shown her, and that she also has children round her knees. What strange memories the writing of names awakens! I am nearly sure that I told Agnes Mowbray that I loved her—nay, worse than that, I'm nearly sure that I did love her. Don't make mischief, old man, by hinting so much to her husband. I may see her when I get back to England; but I shall not be able to stir from here for at least six months. You can have no idea how thoroughly broken down I am."

Her tears did not flow when she had finished reading the letter, written in that curiously cramped hand that scarcely bore any resemblance to the bold scrawl which ran over the old pages of his letters that she treasured. She did not weep. She felt a curious little sting of disappointment as she read the latter part of the postscript—a curious little stab, as with the point of a sharp needle.

He had said no word about her in any part of the letter: he had made no allusion to her until he had

that afterthought which he embodied in the postscript, and then he had only alluded to her in order that he might express a doubt in regard to her constancy.

Yes; he had actually taken for granted that she had cast to the winds the promise which she had made to him—the promise to love him and him only, and to wait patiently until his return should unite their lives for evermore. Did it seem to him impossible that any woman should remain faithful to one man when apart from him? Was it possible that he knew so little of her nature as to fancy that the passing of years would weaken her faith? What has time got to do with such matters as love and faith?

For a moment she felt that sharp stab, but then the pain that it caused her passed away in the thought of the rapture which could not fail to be his when he became aware of the truth—of her truth, of her love, of her faith in the bounty of heaven. It was not pride in her own fidelity that she felt at that moment: she could not see that she had any reason for pride, for fidelity was so much a part of her nature she had ceased to think of it, just as a man with a sound heart never gives a thought to his heart. It had never occurred to her that there was anything remarkable in the fact that she had passed eight years of her life waiting for the return of the man whom all the world believed to be dead. If

she had been waiting for double the time she would not have felt any cause for pride. The glow which came over her, making her forget the pain that she had felt on reading the careless words of her lover's postscript, was due to the thought of the delight that would be his when he came to know that she had never a thought of loving any one save himself.

Would it seem such a wonder to him? Well, let it seem a miracle to him so long as it gave him pleasure. If she had been overwhelmed with happiness at the miracle of his restoration to her, why should he not be overjoyed at the miracle of her restoration to him?

She sat for a long time at the open window, thinking her thoughts, while before her eyes the soft velvety darkness of the exquisite July night slipped over the garden. The delicate dew scents filled the air, and the perfume of the roses mingled with that of the jessamine which dropped from the trellis-work of the verandah. The drone of a winged beetle rising and falling in musical monotone, like the sound of a distant bell borne by a fitful breeze, came to her ears. A bat whirled past the opening of the window, and the cat that was playing after the moths on the lawn, struck out at it for a moment. And then a servant brought lamps into the room.

She started from her reverie, and became aware in an instant of the details of the scene before her.

It was such a scene as had been before her many times during her life. How often had she not sat there in the early night, wondering if the man whom she loved would ever sit by her side again in the long twilight of a summer's day in England—at home—at home!

And now she thought of him lying alone among the strange trees—the mighty broad-leaved palms, the enormous ropes of the trailing plants falling around him. Was he thinking of the English home which he had forsaken, but which was waiting for him? How often had not he found comfort in the midst of his desolation through picturing the garden at The Knoll, as he had walked in it on those summer nights long ago?

Alas! alas! With his thoughts of the old garden and the old times there must have come that terrible thought which he had hinted at in his letter—the thought that she had been unfaithful to him. Ah, how could he ever have had such a thought? She had heard of fickle women—loving a man passionately one day, and the next carried away by the glamour of a new face and a changed voice—but how could he fancy for a moment that she was such a woman?

Thus she sat, with her thoughts and her memories and her anticipations, until the full moon had arisen behind the trees of Westwood Court and was flooding the sky with light and sending the great shad-

ows of the elm far over the lawn. When the sound of the striking of the church clock roused her from her reverie, she was conscious of one thought: that the pang that must have been his when he wrote that postscript would soon pass away in the joy of knowing that she had been true to him.

But it was a long time before she went to sleep that night.

CHAPTER XII.

It had fallen to her lot to write to Claude Westwood the letter which told him of the death of the brother to whom he had all his life been devoted. She knew that a telegraphic message had been sent to the Consul at Zanzibar respecting the death of Richard Westwood, the day after the news of the safety of Claude had reached England, so that he would not receive the first shock of the terrible news from her. She had done her best in her letter to comfort him—indeed, every word that it contained was designed to be a consolation to him. Why, the very sight of her writing would make him feel that his grief was shared by at least one friend.

That letter had not, of course, been written in the strain of the letters which she had sent to him during the first few months after his arrival in Africa. (Some of them had been returned to her from Zanzibar with the inscription "Not found" on the covers.) She thought that any of the rapturous phrases, which could give but very inadequate expression to what was in her heart, would be out of place in a letter that she meant to be expressive only of the deep sympathy she felt for him.

But the following week she had written to him

something of what was in her heart. She had taken up once more the strain of that correspondence which had been so rudely interrupted, and had wondered to find how easily the unaccustomed words of endearment slipped from her pen. It seemed to her that her love had been accumulating in her heart through all the years of her enforced silence, for she had never before written to him such phrases of affection. When she had written that letter she had a sense of relief beyond expression. The pent-up flood had at last found a vent. She gave a great sigh as she signed, not her own name, but the pet name which he had given her—a great sigh, and then a laugh of delight.

But then she caught sight of herself in the looking-glass that hung above her escritoire. It seemed to her that all her hair had become grey—that her face had become all scarred with lines. She closed her eyes and had a vision of the slender girl to whom that love-name had been given. She had a vision of the sparkling eyes, the brown hair flung back when one long shining strand had escaped from the knot in which it had been tied, and fell down from her shoulder. She could see his eyes as he turned them upon her, when he had kissed and kissed that wonderful rivulet of hair, calling her by that love-name.

And now. . . .

Ah, she was no longer a girl! The pet name

which she had written so lightly no longer sat lightly upon her. Would not people think it grotesque for a woman past thirty to call herself by the name that had once seemed so charmingly appropriate when applied to a girl of twenty-three with a rivulet of golden brown hair flowing over her shoulders to meet a lover's kisses?

But then she recollected the story she had heard of the true lover who loved so well that the gods had given to him the greatest gift in their power—the gift of blindness, so that at the end of forty years when he and the woman he loved had grown old together, she still seemed to him the girl she had been on the first day that he had seen and loved her.

There would be nothing grotesque in that lover calling his wife by the love-name of her youth. But would such love blindness be given to Claude, so that he should still think of her as the slim girl with the loose hair?

Alas! Alas! He might tolerate the letter signed as she had signed it, but in a few months he would be face to face with her, and would he not see that she was no longer a girl?

Only for a moment she paused as that melancholy question passed through her mind. Then she flung down the letter, crying:

"I will trust him. I will trust him as I have trusted him hitherto. He will love me better, better, better, seeing that it was the years of waiting for

him that gave me the grey hairs where only brown had been."

It never occurred to her to ask herself if it was not possible that the years which had given her half a dozen grey hairs, had brought about quite as great a change in her lover. It never occurred to her to think that there was a possibility that the years spent among savages—wandering through the forests where malaria lurked—starving at times and in peril of beasts and reptiles and lightning and sunstroke every day of his life, had changed him in some measure—even in as great a measure as the years of watching and waiting had altered her.

His portrait stood by her side day and night. Every day and every night she had kissed that picture of the young cavalry officer that smiled out at her from the frame. That was the portrait of her lover, and never for a moment did she think of him as otherwise than that portrait revealed him to her.

So she had posted the first of her new series of love-letters to him with no great heaviness of heart; and then there began for her a fresh period of waiting; for she knew that some months must elapse before her letters could reach him, and after that an equal space before she could receive his reply.

But the barley crop had only been reaped in the golden fields of Brackenshire when Mr. Westwood's lawyer brought her a telegram which he had just received from Zanzibar. It was not from Claude,

but from a doctor whose name she frequently heard in connection with the exploration of Africa.

"Westwood arrived here to-day from Uganda, overcome with fatigue, not serious. Leaves for England, probably fortnight."

So the telegram ran, and her heart leapt up, for she knew that her days of waiting were being shortened. He had doubtless received no news of his brother's death when at Uganda, and although he had intended to remain there until he should be fully restored to health, he had made up his mind to return at once to England. But what had caused her heart to leap up was the sudden thought that came to her:

"He has received my letter, and he knows that I am true to him."

A moment afterwards she recollected that it would have been impossible for him to receive a letter from her—even her first letter—while he was still at Uganda. He had started for the coast immediately on getting the news by telegraph of the death of his brother, and both her letters, being addressed to him at Uganda, had, it was almost certain, crossed him on the road to the coast.

Still, her days of waiting would be shortened, and that thought gladdened her. Only for a week was she left in the torture of the apprehension that the journey to the coast might have proved too much for him, and that he might die at Zanzibar. All the

accounts that had been published in the newspapers regarding him had dwelt upon the necessity there was for him to remain at Uganda until he had in some measure recovered from the effects of his terrible experiences; so that she felt she had grave reason to be apprehensive for him.

The newspapers shared her anxiety not only in telegraphic despatches from Zanzibar, which involved the expenditure of large sums, but also in leaders and leaderettes, which like George Herbert's "good words," were "worth much and cost little."

At first the news came that the explorer whose name was in every one's mouth, was completely prostrated by his journey; but soon the gratifying intelligence was received that he was making a good recovery, and had gone for a week's excursion in a gunboat that had been placed at his disposal until the mail steamer should be leaving Zanzibar.

It was thought advisable by his physician to put some miles of green sea between Claude Westwood and the scores of enterprising gentlemen who were anxious to see him. The newspaper men were polite but urgent; the English publisher's agent was business-like and impressive; these gentlemen were not so greatly dreaded by the doctor, though he would have liked to be summoned to take a part, however humble, in a post-mortem examination on each of them. But when it came to his knowledge that the American lecture-bureau agent had bought

the house next to the Consulate and was reported to be making a subterranean passage between the two so as to give him an opportunity of an interview with Mr. Westwood. The doctor thought it time to make representations to the commander of the gunboat.

Mr. Westwood was smuggled aboard the vessel at midnight, the anchor was weighed as unostentaciously as possible, and the gunboat steamed out of the harbour at dawn; but it was said that the commander had to bring his two big guns to bear upon a steam launch hastily chartered by the lecture agent to follow the vessel in order that he might board her and get the explorer to sign an agreement for a hundred lectures in the States during the forthcoming fall.

Then came the news that Mr. Westwood had returned to Zanzibar so greatly improved in health by his cruise that he would be permitted to make the voyage to England by the next mail; and, of course, all the correspondents, the publishers' agents and lecture agents hastened to engage cabins on the same steamer. The briefest of telegrams announced the departure of the steamer in due course, and Agnes found herself able to breathe again. In less than a month he would be by her side.

It was very generally felt among those hostesses in Mayfair who are the most earnest of lion-hunters, that Mr. Westwood was guilty of a gross breach of

manners in not timing his arrival for the spring of the London season. Some of the more enterprising of them had long ago sent out cards of invitation to him at Uganda, for receptions to be held in the spring. Others had given him a choice of dates, and left it optional for him to have a dinner, an at-home, or a garden-party. In these circumstances it was thought that in changing his plans, starting from Uganda at once instead of remaining there, as he had at first intended, for six months, he was behaving very badly.

How could any man expect to be treated as a hero in the month of October? they asked, as they felt that the honour and glory which attaches to the exhibition of lions were slipping from their fingers.

They had long ago forgotten that the same newspapers which had announced the safety of Claude Westwood had contained that heading, "The Brackenshire Tragedy"; and when it was announced that Mr. Westwood was compelled to decline all engagements, as it was his intention to remain in the seclusion of Westwood Court for several months, people shrugged their shoulders, and went on with their pheasant shooting.

They said that Mr. Westwood would find out the mistake he was making before the next season; adding that their memories were quite equal to recalling instances of heroes, who were looked on as such in the autumn, becoming stale and of no

market value whatever before the next London season.

They rather feared that Mr. Westwood had failed to remember that the most evanescent form of heroism is that which is the result of African exploration. Africa as a field for the development of heroes was getting used up; the Arctic regions were already running it close, and Polar bears were as good as lions any day. Oh yes, Mr. Westwood might find himself compelled to take a back seat next May in the presence of the man who had come from Formosa with a crimson monkey, or the man who had come from Klondyke with a nugget the size of an ostrich's egg.

The people who talked in this strain could with difficulty be made to understand that the tragic circumstances of the death of Mr. Westwood's brother might possibly cause him, quite apart from all considerations in regard to his own health, to wish to live in retirement for a few months. They would rather have been disposed to appraise his value in a drawing-room or as a "draw" at a reception, at a somewhat higher figure, by reason of the fact that the death of his brother had for close upon a fortnight been one of the Topics of the Season. A man who is in any way associated with a Topic of the Season is a welcome guest in every house.

But Agnes, knowing how attached the brothers had been all their lives, understood how distasteful

—more than distasteful—to Claude would be the idea of lending himself for exhibition in order to attract people to some of those houses whose attractiveness is dependent upon the freak of the fashion of the hour. She had also a feeling that, although he had written that curiously flippant postscript, Claude had still in his heart no doubt as to her faithfulness. She felt that he knew that his retirement would mean the taking up with her of the book of life at that glowing passage at which they had laid it down. After such a separation, what a meeting would be theirs!

And yet as the hour for his coming approached, she felt more and more as if she were waiting to meet a stranger. She felt all the shyness that she had felt years before when, as a girl, she had found herself in the same room with Claude Westwood. She had read of his heroic action on the North-West Frontier of India—of that splendid cavalry charge, which he had led, retrieving the honour of his country when it was trembling in the balance, and so when she found herself presented to him as though he were an ordinary man whom she was meeting casually, she had felt quite overcome with shyness.

And this was the very feeling which she now had when she was counting the days that must elapse before his arrival. At first it had been her intention to meet him aboard the steamer that was bringing

him to England. If she had not read that postscript she might even have thought of going out to meet him at Suez—nay, of going out to Zanzibar itself; but somehow the reading of those words at the close of the letter, which were meant for his brother's eyes alone, had left an impression on her from which she could not easily free herself.

That was how she came to feel that she was about to meet a stranger, and that the idea of waiting on the dock side for the arrival of the steamer seemed repugnant to her.

Then the day which was notified to her as that on which the steamer would be due, arrived, and found her awaiting with almost breathless excitement whatever should happen. It was midday when the telegram was brought to her: it was addressed, not to her, but to the family lawyer.

"*Arrived. Shall be at the Court in time for dinner.*"

These were the words which she read while her heart beat tumultuously at the thought that she would see him in a few hours. She stood opposite his picture, feeling that in future it would possess only an artistic interest for her. She would be left wondering how it had ever been so much to her. But what was on her mind now was the question,

"Will he drive here on his way to the Court?"

"Well, she would be prepared to meet him: but

how was she to welcome him? She had heard of girls who had been parted from their lovers for years, putting on the dress which they had worn on the day of parting, so that it might seem that the time they had been apart was annihilated. She actually hunted up the old dress that was associated with her parting from Claude. It was still fit to be worn, for she had paid her maid compensation for allowing her to retain it. But when she looked at it she laughed. It was made in the fashion of nine years before, and every one knows how ridiculous a fashion seems nine years out of date.

Annihilate time! Heavens! to wear a dress made in this style would be the best way that could be imagined of emphasising the space of years that had passed. She laughed and laid the funny old-fashioned thing, with its ribbons fastened in ridiculous places over it where ribbons are now never seen, back in its drawer.

Alas! the girls about whom she had read had not been separated from their lovers for nine years; or the lovers must have been even blinder than the majority of men are in regard to the details of dress, otherwise they would have looked ridiculous instead of gracious.

She put on her newest dress—it was all white; and when her maid asked her what jewels she would wear, she said suddenly:

"All my diamonds,"

But before her jewel case was unlocked she had changed her mind.

"On second thoughts I will wear only the Wedgwood medallion with the pearls," she said.

The medallion was his last gift to her. She had never worn it since he had pinned it to her shoulder. He would remember that; and in spite of the protest of her maid, who feared for her own reputation as an artist, she fastened it on her shoulder, where never a medallion had been worn within the memory of woman.

It was when she was alone, however, that she put her face close to a looking-glass and plucked from her forehead another grey hair that had put in an appearance. She had never plucked one out before; she had never thought it worth her while; but now she felt that it was worth her while.

Looking out from her dressing-room window she saw that the windows of the Court were brilliant; for months they had been dark.

The hour for the arrival of the train at Brackenhurst went by. She only felt slightly disappointed when he did not call upon her on his way to the Court. But she found this evening, the last of all her days of waiting, the longest of all. He had come—she felt sure of that, and yet though only a mile away, he was as much separated from her as he had been when thousands of miles away, with the barrier of the terrible forests imprisoning him.

She waited in vain for him until it was midnight; and when he did not come, her disappointment changed to anxiety, and her anxiety to alarm. She felt sure that he must be ill. The reports that had been telegraphed to England regarding his health must have been misleading: he could not have recovered so easily from the effects of those awful years spent in savagery. It was she who should have gone to meet him; no matter what people might have said. People—what were people and their chatter to him or to her? He was perhaps lying at the point of death, and her going to him might have saved him, but the next day might be too late.

She spent hours in the restlessness of self-reproach, and when she went to bed it was not to sleep but to weep. Only toward morning did she close her eyes and then for no longer than a couple of hours. The London paper arrived while she was at breakfast, and she found on an inner page a two-column account of the arrival of Mr. Claude Westwood, with particulars of the voyage of the steamer from Zanzibar, and a snap-shot portrait of the distinguished explorer. Of course there was nothing in the portrait that any one could recognise. The picture might have been anything—a map of Central Africa or a prize vegetable. It contained no artistic elements.

She read in the first paragraph of the account of

the arrival, that Mr. Westwood had been in excellent health, the progress that he had made toward recovery when on the cruise in the gun-boat having been apparently completed by the voyage to England. He had started for his home, Westwood Court, Brackenhurst, almost immediately, seeing only a few personal friends in the meantime, the newspaper stated.

Although the reflection that her worst anticipation had not been realised brought her pleasure, she could not avoid feeling disappointed that he had not come to her before he had slept. It seemed so ridiculous to think that although they were within a mile of each other they were still apart. When they had parted it was with such words as suggested that neither of them had a thought for any one except the other. Then through the long years she at least had no thought except for him; and yet they were still apart.

It seemed, too, as the morning advanced, that he had no intention of coming to her this day either.

But if such a thought occurred to her it was soon proved to be an unworthy one, for he came to her shortly after noon.

She was sitting in the room where he had said his good-bye to her long ago. She heard a step on the gravel of the drive and knew it at once. In a moment all the dreary years had slipped away from her like a useless garment. Once more she felt

like that shy girl who had listened in dreadful secrecy and with a beating heart for the coming of her hero—her lover. She felt now as she had felt then—trembling with joyous anticipation, not without a tinge of maidenly fear.

She buried her face in her hands, saying in a whisper:

"Thank God—thank God—thank God!"

And then he entered the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHE had feared, ever since she had been thinking of his return, that she would not be able to restrain her tears when they should be together. The very thought of meeting him had made her weep; but now when she turned her head and saw the tall man with the complexion of mahogany and the hands of teak—with the lean face and the iron-grey hair, she did not feel in the least inclined to weep—on the contrary, she gave a laugh. The change in his face did not seem to her anything to weep about; she had often during the previous three months tried to fancy what he would be like; and it actually struck her as rather amusing to find that he bore no resemblance whatsoever to the picture she had formed in her mind of the man who had lived for several years the life of a savage.

He stood looking at her for a few seconds.

Neither of them spoke.

Then he advanced with both hands outstretched.

"Agnes! Agnes!" he cried, "I have come to talk with you about him—Dick—poor Dick! You saw him on the day that ruffian killed him. You can tell me more than the others about him."

He had both his hands held out to her—not out-

stretched in any attitude of passionate eagerness, but with encouraging friendliness; that was exactly what his attitude suggested to her—encouraging friendliness.

She put both her hands into his without a word—without even rising. He held them for a moment while he looked into her face. There was an expression of restlessness on his face. She saw that his forehead was furrowed with many lines. His eyes were sunken, and there was a curious fierceness in their depths.

Then he dropped her hands, and walked to the window, standing with his back to it and his head slightly bowed.

"It was a terrible shock to me to hear what happened; and to think that the same paper that contained an account of my safety told of his death! To think that within a couple of months we might have been together! My God! When I think that but for an idiotic man falling ill when we were within a month's journey of the lake—a man whose life was worth nothing—I might have been here—at his side—to stand between him and danger!"

He began pacing the room, his hands clenched fiercely and the fire of his eyes becoming more intense.

She sat there without a word, watching him. Her eyes followed him up and down the room.

He stopped suddenly opposite to her.

"It was the cruellest thing ever done on earth!" he cried. "Call it Fate or Destiny or the will of Heaven—whatever you please—I say it was the cruellest thing that ever happened! Why could not he have been spared for a couple of months—until I had seen him—until he had known that I was safe—that I had done more in the way of discovery than I set out to do? But to think that he was killed just the day before—perhaps only an hour before, the news of my safety arrived in England!—it maddens me—it maddens me! I feel that it would be better for me to have remained lost for ever than to return to this. I feel that all that fierce struggle for years—the struggle with those savages, with the climate, the malaria, the agues, the diseases which exist in that awful place but nowhere else in the world—I feel that all that struggle was in vain—that it would be better if I had given in at once—if I had sent a bullet through my head and ended it all! Where is your brother? He was with him on that fatal evening. Why did he go away before he had seen me and told me all that there was to tell about my poor Dick?"

Still she was silent. What answer could she make to such wild questions?

"Cyril should not have gone off to the other end of the world, as I hear he has done," he continued. "He might have known that I would want to ask him much; and yet, when I come here, I find that

he has been gone for more than a month, and there is positively no one in this neighbourhood who can tell me anything more of the horrible affair than has appeared in the newspapers. Fawcett, the solicitor, had kept for me the newspaper account of the inquest and the trial. I saw Fawcett last night, and then the surgeon—Crosby. We went to him after dinner. He it was who showed up the suicide theory. How could it ever be supposed that Dick would commit suicide? And yet, if it hadn't been for Crosby— Oh, it was clearly proved that he could not have shot himself; and yet if it wasn't for the possibility of his having shot himself, would they have pardoned the wretch who did the murder? I read the whole account of the trial, and Fawcett told me a good deal more. If ever a brutal murder was done by a man it was that—and yet they allowed the fellow to escape—to escape—to keep his life! That is what they call justice here! Justice! I tell you that those savages—the most degraded in existence—among whom I lived, have a better idea of justice than that."

Still she was silent. What could she say to him while he was in this mood? He had resumed his pacing of the floor. She no longer watched him. She looked out of the window. She had a strange impression that she had been present at such a scene before, and that she had taken the same impersonal interest in it all. Yes, it had been at a theatre: she

had watched one of the actors pacing the stage and raving about British justice—the playwright had made the character a victim of the unjustness of the law. But the man had kept it up too long: he had exhausted the interest of the audience. They had looked about the theatre and nodded to their friends; but now she only looked out of the window. The audience had yawned: she was not so impolite. She would not interrupt the man before her by speaking a word.

"What excuse did they give for letting the assassin escape?" Claude Westwood was standing once more at the window—the window through which she had watched him coming up the drive to bid her good-bye upon that October evening long ago. "Excuse? The man was found guilty of murder—the most contemptible of murders. He had not the courage to face his victim; he fired at him from behind—and yet they let him escape. But if they had only done that it would not have mattered so much. If they had given him his freedom I would have had a chance of amending the lapse of justice. But they give him his life and protection as well. Why did they not set him free and give me a chance of killing him as he killed my poor brother?"

He stamped upon the floor, and struck his left palm with his right fist as he spoke.

She gave a little cry as she shuddered. He had

at last succeeded in startling her. She had put up her hands before her face.

He looked at her quickly and came in front of her.

"Forgive me, Agnes," he said in an agitated voice. "Forgive me; I have frightened you—horrified you. I have been so long among savages; but I feel that I could kill that wretch, and be doing no more than the will of Heaven. I feel that I could kill all that bear his accursed name, and yet be conscious of doing no evil. My brother—ah, if you knew how I have been supported through these long dismal years by thinking of him—by the thought of the pleasure it would give him to see me again! It was chiefly during that eight months which I spent alone in the forests that I thought about him. What a life I led! I had previously lived the life of a savage, but in the forest I had to live as a wild beast. The terrible vigilance I needed to exercise—it was a war to the knife against all the wild things with fangs and tusks and claws. It was the Bottomless Pit; but the hope of returning to him made me continue the fight when I had made up my mind to fling away my knife and to await the end, whether it came by a snake, a wild elephant, or a lion. I thought of him daily and nightly; and now when I come home I find — And I cannot kill the man who made my hour of triumph my hour of bitterness! There I

go, raving again. Forgive me—forgive me, and tell me about him. You saw him on that day, Agnes."

For the first time she spoke.

"Yes, I saw him," she said. "He was just the same as when you saw him last. He was not the man to change, nor was he the man to expect that others would change."

He looked at her with something of a puzzled expression on his face.

"Change? Change? You mean that he—I don't quite know what you mean, Agnes. Change?"

"He never changed in his belief in you. When people took it for granted that you were dead—years ago—how many years ago?—he believed that you were alive—that you would one day return. He believed that and never changed in his faith. I believed it too."

"And that is the man whose life was taken by a ruffian who remains alive to-day!"

He had sprung to his feet once more, and was speaking in a voice tremulous with passion. He had ignored her reference to herself and her changeless faith.

"He was a man whose soul was full of mercy," she said. "Every one here has heard of his many acts of mercy. There was no one too black for him to pardon. The merciful are those whom Christ pronounced blessed."

"It is not possible that you have set yourself to exculpate the murderer," he cried.

"It is not for me to exculpate him," she replied. "But I know that our God is a God of mercy. Are you not a living witness to that? Were not you spared when every one of your company was lost?"

"I am a poor example for a preacher," said he. "I was spared, it is true; but for what? For what? I am spared to come back to my home to find that it is desolate. Is that your idea of mercy? I tell you that in all that I have passed through, in my hour of deepest misery, in all those terrible days spent in the loneliness of the forest, I never felt so miserable, so lonely, as I did in that house last night. Mercy? It would have been more merciful to me to have let the cobra and the vulture have their way with me; I should have been spared the supreme misery of my life."

"How you loved him!" she said, after a little pause.

"Loved him! Loved him!" he repeated, as if the words made him impatient with their inadequacy. "And the way we used to talk about what would happen when I returned!"

"Ah! what would happen—yes. I do believe that we also talked about it together."

"And here I returned to find all changed."

"All changed? All? You take it for granted

that all has changed? that nothing is as you left it? that no one—no feeling remains unchanged?"

She was looking up at him as he stood gazing out of the window.

"Everything has changed for me. I don't know why I came back. I tell you, Agnes, the very sight of the things that were familiar to me long ago only increases my sense of loss—my feeling that nothing here can ever be the same to me."

"What! that nothing—nothing—can ever be the same to you?"

"That is what I feel."

"You do not think it possible that it is you and you only who have changed?"

"What? Is it possible that you do not see that it is because my affection has not changed through all these years I am miserable to-day!"

"Your affection?"

"Is it possible that you know me so imperfectly as to fancy that my affection for my brother would decrease during the years of our separation? Ah, I thought you would take it for granted that I was differently constituted. I fancied that you would understand what my affection meant."

"And have you found that I did you wrong?"

"You wrong me if you suggest—I do not say that you did actually go so far—that my affection for my brother could ever change."

"I do not suggest that your affection—your affec-

tion for your brother—has changed. Oh, believe me, you have all my sympathy. I have felt times without number, after it was known that you were alive, that your home-coming would be cruel. I knew what a blow it would be to you to receive the news of poor Dick. I hoped that my sympathy — Ah, you must be assured that I feel for your suffering, with all my heart."

"I am sure of it," said he, taking for a moment the hand that she offered him. "If I had not been assured of it, should I be here to-day? I do not underrate the value of sympathy. I have felt better for the sympathy even of strangers. At Uganda —at Zanzibar—everywhere I got kind words; and aboard the steamer—God knows whether I should have landed or not if it had not been for the kind way some of my fellow passengers treated me. Ah! the world holds some good people! They took me out of myself—they made the world seem brighter—well, not brighter, but at least they made it seem less dark to me. When we separated in London yesterday the darkness seemed to fall upon me again. Ah, yes! I have felt what was meant by real sympathy; and yours is real, Agnes. I remember how good you were long ago. If you had been my sister you could not have taken a greater interest in me. And your father—ah, he died years ago, they told me last evening! You see, you were the first person for whom I inquired."

"That was so good of you," she said quietly. There was no satirical note in the low tone in which she spoke.

"Ah! Was it not natural?" he asked. "But I think that I was slightly disappointed to hear that you were still unmarried. I had fancied you now and again with your children about you; and I was ready with a score of stories for the youngsters. I wrote something to poor Dick about himself. I took it for granted that he too would have married and become surrounded with prattlers. Yes, I'm nearly sure that I mentioned your name in my letter to poor Dick."

"Your memory does not deceive you," she said, and now there was a suggestion of satire in her voice, though he did not detect it. "Yes, your letter was brought to me by Mr. Fawcett. Why he should have brought it to me, I am sure you could hardly tell."

"He may have thought that it contained something that should be seen only by the most intimate friend of the family," he suggested. "You see, poor Dick's will mentioned you prominently. That probably impressed Fawcett. But you read what I wrote? You saw that I had not forgotten you—I mentioned your name?"

"Yes, you mentioned my name in a way that showed me you had forgotten me," she replied.

"I don't seem to understand you to-day," he

said. "I suppose when one has been for eight or nine years without hearing a word of English spoken, one degenerates."

"Alas! alas!" she said.

Then he went away.

CHAPTER XIV.

SHE had, of course, left her seat to shake hands with him, and when he had gone she did not sit down. She stood where he had left her, in the centre of the room, with her eyes turned listlessly toward the window. She watched him buttoning up his coat as he walked quickly down the drive. A breath of wind whisked and whirled about him the leaves that had fallen since morning.

Which was the dream—the man whom she seemed to see hurrying away from the house, or the man whom she seemed to see coming toward her amid the same whirling leaves, out from the same grey October landscape?

That was the form taken by her thoughts as she stood there. The landscape was precisely the same as it had been when she had awaited his coming to bid her good-bye before starting on his expedition. The same soft greyness was in the sky, the same skeleton trees stretched their gaunt arms out over the road; the sodden green of the grassy meadows, the great bloom of the chrysanthemums that hid the garden walls, all were the same as they had been; but there was a man hurrying away on the road by which she had stood to watch his approach nine years before.

It seemed to her that she was having but another of the many dreams that had come to her of that man; yes, or was it the memory of a dream that returned to her at that moment—a dream of a devoted lover coming to hold her in his arms and to kiss her face before setting out on the expedition that was to bring honour to him—that was to give him a name of honour which she would share with him?

Which was the dream? Were both dreams? Had she passed her life in a dream, and had she only awakened now?

She drew her hand across her eyes and turned away from the window with an exclamation of impatience. But then she seated herself in front of the fire and bent forward, gazing into the glowing log that had burnt itself out in the grate.

Yes, she was awake now. She could look back and see clearly all that had taken place since she had had that dream of kissing a man and bidding him go forth and win a name for himself. She saw clearly that she had built up for herself the baseless fabric of a vision—that her life had been built upon a foundation no more substantial than air, and now she was sitting among its ruins.

She had lived with but one thought, with but one hope, ever before her, and that hope was to hear the footsteps of the man whom she loved, on the gravel of the drive down which he had gone after bidding

her good-bye. Well, her hope had been realised. She had heard the sound of his feet coming to her —yes, and going from her. Heaven had answered her prayer—the one prayer which she had cried through all the years. She only asked to see him again; all the happiness to follow she took for granted.

And now she was seated gazing at the ashes of the log that had once been a tree—at the ashes of the love that had once been her life.

She was full of amazement. How had this wonderful thing come about? How was it that among all her thoughts of disaster, she had never taken account of the possibility of such a thing as the death of his love? His love had always seemed to her the one thing on earth which was certain. To have doubt of it would be as ridiculous as to question the likelihood of the light of the sun being quenched in darkness. Her faith had sustained her when nothing else had come to her aid.

And yet now she sat there looking into the ashes.

She was benumbed with astonishment; and what caused her most astonishment was her own self-possession during the interview which she had just had with Claude Westwood. She marvelled how it was that she had sat in that chair quietly listening to him, while he boasted of his constancy—of his having remembered her name.

He could not understand what she meant when

she said that the fact of his remembering her name was a proof that he had forgotten her. Surely he should have understood that she meant that he could not make such a reference to her as he had made in his postscript, unless he had forgotten what her nature was.

And yet, that one phrase which had been forced from her, was the solitary expression of the terrible thought that overwhelmed her—the thought that her life was laid in ashes. The reflection upon this marvellous calmness of hers amazed her.

She had heard of women finding themselves face to face with their perfidious lovers, and denouncing them in tragic tones. Was it possible that she was differently constituted from other women? Was ever woman so faithful to a man as she had been? And was not the unfaithfulness of the man in proportion to the fidelity of the woman? And yet she had been content to utter only that one sentence of reproach, and its meaning had been so obscure that he had failed to appreciate it!

The worst of it was that she felt in her heart no bitterness against him. She had no burning wish to reproach him for having made a ruin of her life. She had no fervid desire to be revenged upon him. She wondered if she was different from other women to whom revenge was dear. Had all the spirit—that womanly element which women call spirit—been crushed out of her by that antagonistic element

known as constancy? Had her faith in that man made her faithless to her womanhood?

She failed to find an answer to any of these questions; and she went about her daily duties as she had always done, only with that feeling of numbness upon her heart.

But when night came, and her maid had left her with her freshly-brushed hair falling over her shoulders, she bent her head forward between the candles that were lighted on each side of her toilet glass. She turned over the masses of her hair, and saw the grey lines here and there among them. Then, and only then, her tears began to fall. They came silently, but irresistibly—not in a torrent of passion, but slowly, blinding her eyes, and causing all those pictures of the past which now came crowding before her, to be blurred.

It was a tear-blurred picture that she now saw of Claude Westwood as he had appeared before her eyes on the eve of his departure for Africa—that picture which she had cherished in her heart of hearts through the dreary years. She now failed to see in it any of the features of the man who had been with her that day speaking those wild words about the act of mercy which had been done in regard to the poor wretch who had been found guilty of the murder of Richard Westwood. She had noticed how his eyes had glared with the lust of blood in their depths, as he asked why the wretch had not

been either hanged or set free—set free, so that he, Claude, might have a chance of killing him.

She shuddered, and covered her face with her hands, as if she were trying to shut out this new picture that came to take the place of the old. Was it her doom, she asked herself, to live for the rest of her days with this new picture ever before her eyes —this picture of the haggard, sun-scorched man, who had come back to civilisation with those deep eyes of his full of the blood-lust of the savage?

She picked up his portrait, which he had given her long ago, and which had been her sweetest consolation ever since. She had looked upon it and had kissed it the previous night—every night since he and she had parted. She looked at it now for a few moments. . . . With a cry she flung it on the floor and trampled upon it; she set her heel upon it, and ground the glass of the frame into the painted ivory.

"Wretch—wretch—wretch! Murderer of my youth!" she cried in a low voice, tremulous with passion. "As you have treated me, so shall I treat you. Thank God, I have recovered my womanhood! Thank God!"

She gave a laugh as she looked at the fragments at her feet. But the second laugh which she gave was not a laugh, but a sob. In a torrent of tears she fell on her knees beside the shattered picture, moaning:

"My beloved! Oh, my beloved, forgive me! what have I said? What have I done? Oh, come back to me—come back to me, and we shall be so happy!"

Her tears fell on the fragments of ivory and glass as she gathered them off the floor. As she bent forward her hair fell upon them, hiding them from view. She gathered up all carefully and put every scrap she could find into a drawer, clasping her hands and crying once more:

"Forgive me—forgive me!"

She closed the drawer and fell on her knees, praying that he might be given back to her; but she stopped abruptly after she had repeated her imploration. "Give him back to me!" For the truth came upon her with a shock: it was not her heart that was uttering that imploration.

> "Dead love lives nevermore;
> No, not in heaven!"

That was what her heart was murmuring, while the vain repetition came from her lips:

"Give him back to me—give him back to me!"

But before she had closed her eyes in sleep she had come to the conclusion that she had been somewhat unjust toward him. She felt that it was her wounded vanity which had caused her to be angry with him. She should have known that his first thought on returning to the house where he had

lived with his brother, would be of his brother. She should have known that the reflection that he was for ever separated from the brother to whom he had ever been deeply attached, would take possession of him, excluding every other thought—even the thought that he had returned to be loved by her.

She felt that it should now be her duty to lead him back to her. So soon as the poignancy of his reflection that he was for ever separated from his brother had become less, he would turn to her for comfort, and he would be comforted. The memory of their old love would come back to him, and all the happiness to which she had looked forward for both of them would be theirs. Would it not be possible for them to gather up the fragments of their shattered love as she had gathered up the fragments of the picture she had broken?

Alas, the question which she asked herself failed to bring her happiness; for she knew that no hand could piece together the broken ivory which she had hidden away in her drawer; and still her heart kept moaning:

> "Dead love lives nevermore;
> No, not in heaven!"

The next morning her maid brought her among her letters one in a strange handwriting. It was signed "Clare Tristram."

The name brought back to her long-distant memories of the girl bearing this name, who was to have married Agnes's uncle—her mother's brother, but who on the eve of the wedding, had fled with another man.

She recalled some of the incidents of the story, the most important being that she had been deprived of the privilege of wearing her bridesmaid's dress. She recollected that this had been a great grief to her; she had been about eleven years of age when that disappointment overtook her, and now she could not help recalling how, when she had been told by her mother that Clare Tristram had gone away to marry some one else, she had obligingly offered to wear the dress upon the occasion of Miss Tristram's wedding to somebody else, for she thought it would be a great pity that so lovely a dress should be locked up in a drawer.

The letter which she now found before her was not from this Clare Tristram, but from her daughter. Still it was signed Clare Tristram, and this fact set her thinking. She had never heard the name of the man whom the girl had actually married, and she had certainly never heard that the man was any relation to Clare Tristram.

"DEAR MADAM,—I write to you in great doubt and some fear," the letter ran. "My mother, who died only two months ago at Cairo, where we have

lived for several years, told me, a few days before the end came to her long illness, that I had no relations in the world, and no friends to whom she could entrust me after she was gone; but that she felt that you would accept the charge, if only to save me from her fate. These were the exact words of my dear mother, and I repeat them to you, because I think they may constitute some claim upon your pity, and I feel that I have only your pity to appeal to.

"My mother told me how she had done a cruel wrong to your mother's brother; but that act brought with it such a punishment as few women are called on to bear. The one for whom she forsook the noblest man in the world showed himself within a year of her marriage to be so bad that when he deserted her, she would not let me bear his name. She would not even let me know what that name was.

"Only a few days before her death I heard the pitiful story from her lips, and she told me to go to you, and entreat you to save me from the cruel fate that was hers. I ventured to ask her if she thought it likely that you would receive me, on the ground that she had done a great wrong to your relative; but she said, 'Agnes Mowbray's mother was my dearest friend and schoolfellow, and I know that her daughter will be as her mother was.'

"Dear Miss Mowbray, I venture to repeat to you

the doubts which I expressed to my mother; and if you say to me that you do not wish to see me, I shall not trouble you further; nor indeed shall I pose as one who has been unjustly treated. I have sufficient money for my support, and besides, even if that were to come to an end, I can earn enough by my singing to keep myself comfortably—more than comfortably. The kind friends who took charge of me on the journey to England are quite willing that I should remain with them for an indefinite period. But I can do nothing except what my beloved mother desired me to do.

"That is why I write to you now, entreating you to reply to me. I hope you will.

"CLARE TRISTRAM."

Agnes read this unexpected letter with mixed feelings. It had not much of a suppliant air about it. The writer seemed desirous only to place her in possession of the facts which had compelled her to write.

"Is this child sent by God to draw my thoughts away from myself?" she said as she laid down the letter. "Is the child coming to give me comfort in my sad hour?"

Before evening she had written to Clare Tristram asking her to come on a visit to The Knoll.

CHAPTER XV.

SHE felt better for the girl's coming before the girl had come. Her household was not on so large a scale as to make it unnecessary for her to busy herself with preparations to receive a guest; and this business prevented her from dwelling upon her own position. She had no time left even to consider what steps, if any, she should take to further her design of winning back to herself the love which she had once cherished.

Before she went to sleep on the next night it seemed to her that the time when Claude Westwood loved her was very far off; and before she woke it seemed to her that the time when she loved Claude Westwood was more remote still.

She wondered if her maid and the housemaid would notice the disappearance of the miniature which had stood upon her table. With the thought she glanced in the direction of the drawer in which the fragments were laid—only for a moment, however; she had no time for further reflections.

So far as the servants were concerned she might have made her mind easy. The housemaid had, when brushing out the room, come upon some small splinters of glass and ivory, and it did not require the possession on her part of the genius of a

Sherlock Holmes to enable her to associate such a discovery with the disappearance of the only object of glass and ivory that had been in the room.

There was a good deal of innuendo in the comments made in the kitchen upon the housemaid's discovery. The parlour-maid shook her head and turned her eyes up to the ceiling. The housemaid said that if she wished to say something she could say it. The cook, however, scorning all innuendo, made the far-reaching statement that all men are brutes, and challenged her auditors to deny it if they could.

They could not deny it on the spur of the moment, though subsequently, when the cook was absent, they compared experiences, and came to the conclusion that the statement should be modified in order to be wholly accurate.

The next day Agnes was overtaken in the village by Sir Percival Hope. She could not understand why it was that her face should flush on seeing him; it made her feel uncomfortable for a few moments, and then the strange thought crossed her mind that he was about to tax her with having told him that she and Claude Westwood were to be married. Sir Percival had certainly looked narrowly at her for some time. But then he had begun to talk upon some general topic of engrossing local interest—the curate's health, or something of that sort. (The curate lived on the reputation of having

a weak chest, and every autumn his chest became a topic in the neighbourhood.)

It was not until Sir Percival had walked back with her almost to the entrance to The Knoll that he said very quietly:

"I wonder if you are happy now."

Again she felt her face flushing.

"Happy—happy?" she said, interrogatively.

"Happy in the prospect of happiness," said he. "I suppose that is the simplest way of putting the matter."

She was silent for a long time, until she came to perceive that the silence meant far more than she intended. That was why she cried rather quickly:

"You have seen him—Claude—you have conversed with him?"

"Yes. He came to see me yesterday," replied Sir Percival. "Great heavens! What that man has gone through. He deserves his happiness—the greatest happiness that any man dare hope for."

"Ah, I meant that he should be so happy," she cried, and there was something piteous in her tone.

"And you will make him happy," said her companion. "When a woman makes up her mind on this particular point, a man cannot help himself. His most strenuous efforts in the other direction count for nothing. He will be made happy in spite of himself."

She turned her eyes upon him inquiringly.

"You heard him speak—you heard the way he talks on that terrible matter?"

"Yes; that was how it came about that he visited me. He wanted me to tell him all that I knew on the subject—he was anxious to have the scene in the Assize Court described to him by some new voice. He wished to know if I signed a petition for the reprieve of the murderer, and when I told him no petition had been signed, but that the Home Secretary had reprieved the man after, I supposed, consultation with the judge who tried the case, and with the law officers for the Crown, he seemed to be overcome with astonishment and indignation."

"That's the most terrible thing," said Agnes, with an involuntary shudder. "He regards the granting of his life to that man as a worse crime than the one for which he was condemned. I cannot understand that hunger for revenge—that thirst for the blood of a fellow-creature."

"You cannot understand it because you are a Christian woman," said Percival. "But for my part I must say that I have the widest sympathy for all people; and no passion, however strange it may seem to others, is quite unintelligible to me. I have lived long enough in queer places to have become impressed with the fact that the civilisation which we profess to regard as a part of ourselves is but the thinnest of veneers—nay, of varnishes. The best of us is but a savage with all the passions—all

the nature—of a savage glowing beneath a coat of varnish. My dear Miss Mowbray, we should pray that we may not find ourselves in the midst of such circumstances as put a strain on our civilisation—upon our Christianity."

She gave another little shudder, she knew not why, and turned her wondering eyes upon him.

"My sympathy with savages is unlimited," continued Sir Percival. "One should not judge Claude Westwood from the standpoints to which we have accustomed ourselves. It must be remembered that he has lived for years among the worst savages known in the world; and that he has been obliged to struggle for his life after the most savage, that is, the most natural, fashion. Nature regards a single life very lightly, and the worst of Nature is that she regards the life of a man as no more sacred than the life of a brute."

"But we have our Christianity."

"Thank God that we have that! Pray to God that we may be able to hold the shield of Christianity between ourselves and our nature. I have talked all this cheap philosophy to you—this elementary evolution—only to help you in your hour of need. I take it upon me to advise you unasked, and I would say to you, Do not judge too hastily a man who has lived for so long among barbarians—a man who was compelled to fight for his existence, not with the weapons of civilisation and

Christianity, but with the weapons of savagery. In a short time he will once again have become reconciled to the principles of civilisation. He will learn once more to forgive. For the present, pity him."

He spoke in a low voice, putting out his hand to her. She took his hand, and pressed it. When he turned and went away from her in the direction of his own gates, she remained motionless in the road, looking after him. All her thought regarding him took the form of one thought—that he was the noblest man that lived. He sought only her happiness—so much was sure; he had done his best to reconcile her to the man who was his rival, because he believed that she loved that man.

And he had not pleaded in vain. She felt that she had been selfish and inconsiderate in regard to Claude. She had expected him to come to her just as he had left her—to take her into his arms just as he had done on the evening when they had parted. She had been intolerant of his indifference to her on his return—of his thirst for the blood of the man who had taken the life of his brother.

When she entered her house she went to the drawer where she had placed the fragments of his picture. She looked at these evidences of her impatience for a long time, and when she closed the drawer she was consolidated in her resolve to win him back to her—to wait patiently until he chose to

return to her; she knew no better way of winning an errant love than by waiting for it to return.

The newspapers, however, were by no means disposed to adopt the policy of patience in respect of a distinguished African explorer who declined to give them any information regarding his travels. They had never found such a desire for retirement to be among the most prominent characteristics of African explorers, and they could not believe that Claude Westwood was sincere in objecting to give any of the representatives of the great organs of public opinion a succinct account of the past nine years of his life—as much copy as would make a couple of columns.

The great obstacle in the way of their enterprise was, of course, the handsome income enjoyed by Mr. Westwood. The splendid offers which they made to him produced no impression on him; nor did the assurance that they were not desirous of getting any information from him that might prejudice the sale of his forthcoming volume or volumes —they assumed that a volume or volumes would be forthcoming—no, their desire was merely to give him an opportunity of telling the public just enough to whet their curiosity for his book.

He replied that he had no intention of writing a book, and that he did not seek for publicity in any way.

This was very irritating to the representatives of

the newspapers, who came down to Brackenhurst with such frequency during the first few days after Mr. Westwood's return. But they revenged themselves upon him in another way; for, as he refused to tell them anything about Central Africa, they told their readers everything about Brackenshire. They gave occasional photographs of Westwood Court: "Westwood Court—North View," "Westwood Court—The Queen's Elms," "Westwood Court—The Trout Stream." One newspaper representative surpassed all his brethren by obtaining an excellent photograph of the interior of the dairy at the Home Farm.

This was how matters stood in regard to Mr. Westwood and the outer world when Agnes awaited the arrival of the girl whom she had invited to visit her for an indefinite period. The period was necessarily an indefinite one: Agnes could not tell how long she should have to wait for the return of the love that had once been hers.

She got a letter from Clare Tristram, in reply to her invitation, thanking her for her kindness, and suggesting a certain train by which she hoped to travel to Brackenhurst, if its arrival was at an hour that suited Miss Mowbray's convenience.

She arrived by that train. Agnes sent her brougham and her maid to meet her at the station, and she herself was waiting at the open door of the house when the visitor arrived.

She was a tall girl—quite as tall as Agnes—and with very dark hazel eyes; her hair was brilliantly golden, with a suggestion of coppery red about it in some lights. Her face possessed sweetness rather than beauty of shape or tint, and the curve of her mouth suggested the expression of a smile when seen from one direction. Looked at from the front its expression seemed one of sadness.

Agnes saw both the smile and the sadness as she gave her hand to the girl, and led her into one of the drawing-rooms.

"You must have some tea before changing your dress," she said. (She had not failed to notice that the girl's travelling dress was extremely well made, and that her hat was in perfect taste. She knew that most women are to be known by their hats.) Then she stood in front of the girl, looking into her face tenderly. "I should know you in a moment from your likeness to your mother," she continued.

"Ah, you did not see her recently," said Clare, with a little sob.

"I did not see her since you were born," said Agnes. "But still I recollect her face distinctly. I can see her before me when I look at you now. Poor woman! She suffered; but she had you. No one could take you from her."

"That may have been a consolation to her long ago," said Clare, "but I am afraid that during her

last illness the thought of my future was a great burden to her. You see, we had no relations in the world; at least, none to whom I could be sent."

"I feel that it was kind of your mother to think of me," said Agnes, as they seated themselves and drank their tea.

"She used to speak daily of you, Miss Mowbray," said the girl. "She told me how attracted she had been to your mother until— Ah, I heard the sad story. Believe me, she was bitterly punished."

"Poor creature! I knew that she had been unhappy. Your father—I have been trying to recollect his name during the past few days, but I have not been successful."

"I never heard what his name was. My mother kept it from me from the first. She said she never wished to hear it again. It was not until I was fifteen that I learned that she bore her maiden name, and not my father's. I fear he was—well, he cannot have been a good man."

"We need not refer to him again. I have no curiosity on the subject, I assure you."

"I have long ago lost any that I once had. I hope I am not an unnatural daughter, but I have no wish to hear anything about my father."

"Instead of talking about him, my dear, we will talk together about your mother. I feel that in entrusting you to me she paid me the greatest compli-

ment in her power. I am sure that we shall be friends—sisters, Clare."

"How good you are! Ah, we shall be sisters. My dear mother knew you; though I feared—I told you so in my letter—that you would consider the claim made upon you a singular one. I did not say so to her; I did not wish her last days to be worried with doubts, so I promised her to go to you, and she gave me a letter which was to introduce me. She desired me to put it into your hand. I do so now, though there is no need for it, is there?"

"None whatever," said Agnes, smiling, as she took the sealed letter which the girl handed to her. "I shall read it at my leisure. Oh no; you do not need any letter of introduction to me."

"I was afraid to come here directly on landing," said Clare; "yes, even though I bore that letter; so I thought it better to write to you from London, stating my case."

She had risen, laying her tea-cup on the table. Agnes rang the bell for her maid to show Miss Tristram to her room.

So soon as she was alone Agnes clasped her hands and said:

"Thank God!—thank God! I feel that she has been sent here to comfort me."

She was led to wonder what the girl would have done if she had come to Brackenhurst and found her, Agnes, on the eve of being married to Claude

Westwood. How desolate the poor thing would have felt—almost as desolate as Agnes herself had felt a few days before!

She thought that Clare was the sweetest girl she had ever seen. She felt better for her coming already; and with this thought on her mind she picked up the letter which she had laid on the table. She broke the seal and began to read the first page. Before she finished it her eyes were tremulous. The words that the dying woman had written committing her daughter to her care, seemed full of pathos. She laid down the letter, she could not read it on account of her tears. Some time passed before she picked it up once more; but before she had read half-way down the second page she gave a start and a little cry. With her head eagerly bent forward and her eyes staring she continued reading, half articulating the words in a fearful whisper. The hand that was not holding the letter was pressed against her heart. Then she gave another cry, and almost staggered to a chair into which she dropped. The letter fell from her hands; she stared straight in front of her, breathing heavily.

"My God!" she cried at last. "My God! to think of it! To think of her in this house! Oh, the horror of it!"

Her words came with a shudder, and she covered her face with her hands. The next instant, however, she had started up and was gazing eagerly to-

ward the window; the sound of a foot that she knew came from the gravel of the drive.

She stood there with one hand clutching the back of a chair, the other still pressed against her side. She was listening eagerly for the ringing of the bell.

The ring came. She rushed across the room to where the letter was lying, and hastily thrust it into her pocket. When Claude Westwood entered the room she was seated with a book in front of the fire.

CHAPTER XVI.

"My dear Agnes," he cried, before he had more than entered the room. "My dear Agnes. I only heard this afternoon of the heroic way you behaved on that day—that terrible day when those fools made the run upon the bank. I have come to thank you. Why on earth I was not told of that incident the day I arrived, I am at a loss to know. I don't think that the bank can boast of much intelligence. At any rate, I know now that you saved us—you saved us from—well, the cashier says the doors of the bank would have been closed inside half an hour if you had not appeared so opportunely. How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

She looked at him. He failed to notice within her eyes a strange light. He could not know that she had heard nothing of his speech.

"Yes, I repeat that we owe all to you," he went on. "I'm sure that poor Dick felt it deeply. And Sir Percival Hope—it was his cheque, the cashier told me; and yet he didn't say a word to me about it when I called upon him a few days ago. But how on earth did you raise the money? Perhaps—I don't know—should I congratulate you—and him? Yes, certainly, and him."

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I was wonder-

ing—ah, these things sometimes do occur—I mean — Is it possible that you intend to remain at the Court during the winter? Surely your doctors will not allow it. You will go abroad."

"I see that you evade my question," said he, with a laugh. "There is no reason why you should do so. I think Hope a very good chap, especially since I have heard that it was his cheque. And I said in my letters to Dick that I supposed you had got married long ago."

"I'm afraid that I have not been paying sufficient attention to what you are saying. Sir Percival Hope?—you mentioned Sir Percival," said Agnes.

"Heavens! I have been wasting my compliments—you have been thinking of something else."

"I wonder if you have learned to forgive as well as to forget," said she.

"What on earth do you mean?" he cried. "You are a trifle distraite, are you not? What has forgiving or forgetting to do with what I have been saying?"

"The wretched man—I was thinking of him. You have forgotten a good deal of the past that others have remembered, but forgiveness—that is different."

"Do you mean to ask me if my feelings are unchanged in respect of that ruffian—that wretch who killed the best man that ever lived in the world? If that is your question I can answer you. I stand

here and tell you that no night passes without my cursing him and all that belongs to him. If he has a brother—if he has a wife—if he has a child—may they all suffer what"—

"No, no, no, no; for God's sake, don't say those words, Claude. You do not know what they mean. You cannot know."

She had sprung from her chair and had caught the hand which he had clenched fiercely as he spoke.

"You cannot tell who it is that you are cursing," she said imploringly. "No one can tell. He may have a wife—a child—would you have them suffer for the crime of their father?"

"I would have them suffer. It is not I, but God, who said 'unto the third and fourth generation.' I am on the side of God."

"And this is the man whom I once loved!"

He started as she flung his hand from her—the fingers were still bent—and walked across the room, striking her palms together passionately.

He started. There was a pause before he said slowly and not without tenderness—the tenderness of the sentimentalist, not the lover:

"How young we both were in those days! I'm sure we both believed most fervently that we were in love. Alas! alas! But in affairs like these the statute of limitations is automatic in its working. Nature has decreed, so we are told, that in the course of seven years every particle of that work which we

call man becomes dissolved; so that nothing whatever of the man whom we see to-day is a survival of the man whom we knew seven years ago."

"Ah, that is true—so much we know to be true," she cried, and in her voice there was a note of tenderness.

She looked across the room and saw that his eyes were not turned toward her. They were turned toward the window. She saw that he was staring into the garden, and on his face there was an expression of surprise, mingled with doubt.

She took a few steps to one side, and her hand made a little spasmodic grasp for the curtain, when she had seen all that he saw.

Out there a charming picture presented itself against a background of bare trees, and a blue autumn sky from which the sun had just departed. A tall girl, wearing a white dress and crowned with shining golden hair, stood on the grass, while above and around her and at her feet scores of pigeons flew and circled and strutted. She was encircled with moving plumage—snow-white, delicate mauve, slate blue—some trembling poised about her head, some with their wings drawn up as they were in the act of alighting, others curving in front of her, and now and again letting themselves drop daintily upon her shoulders, and perching upon the finger which she held out to them. All the time she was laughing and crooning to them in a musical tone.

That was the scene which he was watching eagerly, as he gazed through the window, quite oblivious of the fact that Agnes was watching him breathlessly.

"Merciful heaven!" she heard him whisper. "Merciful heaven!"

She gave a little gasp. There was a silence in the room. Outside there was a laugh and the strange croon of the girl.

He turned to Agnes.

"Who is that girl?" he asked.

She affected not to understand his question. She raised her eyes, saying:

"Girl? What girl?"

"There—outside—on the lawn."

"Oh, Miss Tristram—have you seen her before?"

"Have I seen—how does she come to be here? Ah, I need not ask you. You heard me speak of her and invited her here. You are so good. Did you tell her that I was in this part of the country? I do not think that I ever mentioned that my home was in Brackenshire."

The expression of surprise which had been on his face became one of pleasure.

She watched him dumbly, as he unfastened the latch of the window and opened one of the leaves. She saw Clare turn round at the click of the latch, and glance toward the window. She saw the look of surprise that had been on Claude's face come to

Clare's as she stood there in the midst of the wheeling birds. The pause lasted only a few seconds; it was broken by the laugh of the girl as she went to the window.

He stepped out to meet her with outstretched hand, and the girl laughed again.

Agnes fell back against the tapestry curtain clutching it with each hand, and staring across the empty room.

"My God! he knows her—he knows her."

One of her hands went down instinctively to the pocket into which she had thrust the letter brought by Clare. She kept her hand over it as though she were trying to hold it back from some one who wanted to get it. That was her attitude while she listened to the surprised greeting of the girl by Claude. He was saying that they had not been parted for long—certainly not so long as Clare—he called her Clare quite trippingly—had predicted they should be; and Clare inquired of him if he knew Miss Mowbray. Was he also a guest in Miss Mowbray's house?

"Heavens!" he cried, "surely I mentioned in the course of one of my long chats aboard the old *Andalusian* that I lived near Brackenhurst."

"Lived near Brackenhurst?" she said with a laugh. "Why, I was under the impression that you lived near Bettinviga, in the land of the Gakennas, beyond the great Smoke Falls of the Zambesi.

I hope I have improved in my pronunciation of the names. Oh no; you never said anything about Brackenshire. If you had done so I should certainly have told you that I was going into that country also—that is, if I succeeded in inducing Miss Mowbray to receive me."

The expression that Agnes's face had worn gradually passed away as she heard them chatting together making mutual explanations. She was able to loose her hands from the curtain that had supported her. She was even able to give a smile—a sort of smile—as she straightened herself and took a step free of the curtain and facing the window.

"Is it possible that you were fellow-passengers on the *Andalusian?*" she asked.

"I fancied that I had told you of meeting Clare and her friends aboard the steamer that took us on from Aden," said he. "Yes, I feel certain that I told you how much better I felt for the sympathy they offered me."

"You mentioned that, but you did not give me any names," said Agnes. "Pray come back to the sphere of influence of the fire, Clare; you must learn not to trust our English climate too implicitly. How the pigeons have taken to you! You must have some charm for them."

"We lived in Venice for two years, and the pigeons of St. Mark's became my greatest friends," said the girl. "I used to feed them daily, and it

was while feeding them that a dear old man, who loved them also, taught me how to talk to them. I could not resist the temptation of trying if the birds here understood the language, so I went out to them from the next room when I saw them on the lawn."

"And I think you may assume that your experiment was a success," said Agnes, closing the window when the girl had entered, followed by Claude. "Do you know of any other charms to prevail upon other creatures?"

"Oh yes," she cried: "a fakir whom I knew at Cairo taught me how to charm lizards. The first time we see any green lizards I will show you how to mesmerise them."

"I'm afraid you'll not have quite so much practice here as you had in Egypt," said Agnes. "Our green lizards are not plentiful. I will get you to impart to me your secret so far as the pigeons are concerned; I won't trouble you to teach me the incantation for the lizards. You joined the *Andalusian* at Suez, I suppose?"

"Yes; Colonel and Mrs. Adrian took charge of me on the voyage to England, and it was from their house in London I wrote to you," replied Clare.

"Adrian and I had gone through a campaign together," said Claude. "His face was the first that I recognised on my return to civilisation. I knew no one at Uganda, and at Zanzibar I avoided seeing

any one, though the newspaper correspondents were very friendly; but Adrian was the first man I saw when I got aboard the steamer at the Red Sea. Seeing him made me feel old. I had left him a captain with about half-a-dozen between him and a majority. It appears that the frontier people had taken advantage of my enforced absence to get up a quarrel or two with their legitimate rulers who had annexed them a year or two before; and it only required a few accidents to give Adrian his command."

"Colonel Adrian told us that Mr. Westwood had been giving it as his opinion that it was very hard that he had not had an opportunity of distinguishing himself while the Colonel had been so fortunate," laughed Clare, turning to Agnes.

"Did the newspaper men show any great desire to have an interview with your friend, Colonel Adrian?" said Agnes.

"If they had they would have learned something about the Chitralis and their ways," said Claude. "I'm afraid that the people in England are slightly indifferent to the great question of the North-West frontier."

Clare laughed, and Agnes perceived that he had been giving a little imitation of the Indian officer, who had become an authority on the great frontier question and could not understand how people at home refused to devote themselves to its study.

"Englishmen want to hear about nothing but Africa just now," said Agnes. "They have come to regard Africa as an English colony."

"And yet the greatest living explorer of Africa refuses to communicate a single paragraph to the newspapers in regard to his discoveries," cried Clare. "I consider that a great shame; I hope you feel as strongly on the subject, my dear Miss Mowbray."

"Mr. Westwood seems to have lost all his early ambition," said Agnes.

"That is true," said Claude, in a low voice. "I have lost my brother."

Clare looked grave. Agnes glanced at the man. She wondered how it was possible that he could forget the words which he had spoken in that same room when she only had been there to hear them. "It is for you—it is for you," he had cried. "It is for you I mean to go to Africa. I have set my heart upon winning a name that shall be in some degree worthy of you, my beloved!"

Those were the words which he had said to her while his arms were about her and her cheek rested on his shoulder. How was it possible that he could forget them? How could he now talk about having lost all his ambition? She was his ambition. He had gone forth to win a jewel of honour that should be worthy of her wearing, and he had returned, having snatched that jewel from the very hand of Death, but he had not laid it at her feet.

Still she was silent. She remembered what Sir Percival had said to her: it was left for her to win him back.

It was Clare who had the boldness to break the impressive silence that followed his pathetic phrase, "I have lost my brother."

"You told me that he had ambition," said she. "You told me that his ambition was your success, and yet you refuse to let the world know how you have succeeded."

He looked at her for a few moments. Her face was slightly flushed by the force of the earnestness with which she had spoken.

"Perhaps," he said, slowly, "perhaps my ambition may awake again one of these days. I saw some queer things. Sometimes, when I think of them—of the strange people—savages, but with a code and religious traditions precisely the same as those of the Hebrews—I feel that it might perhaps be well if I wrote something about them; but then, I feel—oh no, I can't bring myself to do anything now. I cannot do anything until"—

His face darkened. He walked away from her to the window. In an instant he called out in quite a different tone from that in which he had spoken:

"There are your pets still, Clare. They are waiting for you on the lawn."

"I must send them back to their cote without

delay," said the girl. "May I step outside for one moment, Miss Mowbray?"

"Only for a moment, my dear child. I am afraid that you place too much confidence in our English climate."

He opened the window, and Clare stepped out among the pigeons that rose in a cloud to meet her. Claude followed her slowly.

Agnes watched them without leaving her seat. They stood side by side in the fading light.

"God help her! God help her!" said Agnes, in a low voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I WONDER if you will think our life here desperately dull," said Agnes, when she had dined *tête-à-tête* with Clare that same night. "I wonder will you beg of me to turn you out after you have experienced a week of our country life."

"I don't think it very likely," said Clare. "I feel too deeply your kindness in taking me in. You see, I was not brought up to look upon much society as indispensable. We lived in many places on the Continent, my mother and I, but we never mingled with the English colony in any place. My mother seemed to shun her own countrypeople. We made only a few friends in Italy, and even fewer during the two years we were in Spain. Of course, when we went to Egypt we had to be more or less with the English there; but I suppose my mother had her own reasons for never becoming amalgamated with the regular colony. As a rule, we saw very little society; and, indeed, I don't feel as if I wanted much more now. I think I have become pretty independent of my fellow-creatures. If I am allowed to paint all day and to sing all night, I'll ask for nothing more."

"You will sing for me to-night," said Agnes, "and to-morrow you can begin your painting. I

suppose you had many chances of studying both arts in Italy."

"No one could have had more," replied Clare. "I know that my education generally was neglected. I'm not sure of my spelling of English, and as for my sums, I know they are deplorable. But my dear mother was afraid that one day I might find myself compelled to earn money to live, and she said that no girl ever made money by spelling and working out sums."

"I think she was right in that idea. Being a governess is not the same as making money. And so she gave you a chance of studying painting and music? But painting and music do not invariably mean making money either."

Clare laughed.

"No one knows that better than I do, Miss Mowbray," she cried.

"Please do not call me Miss Mowbray," said Agnes. "Have I once called you Miss Tristram? My name is not a horrid one. It does not set one's teeth on edge to pronounce it. Now don't say that there's such a difference between our ages; there really is not, you know."

"I shall never call you anything but Agnes again," said the girl.

"That's right; and perhaps in time I shall come to think myself as young as you are. The story of your education interests me greatly. Pray continue

it. Did you learn painting or singing first? I suppose that question is absurd; you must have found your voice when you were a child."

"I found myself with a kind of voice, but no one seemed to think that it was worth considering. That was why I spent five years studying the technique of painting. It was only one day when I thought myself alone in a picture gallery and began singing a country song, that a little grey-haired man appeared from behind one of the pillars. I thought that he was one of the caretakers, and I did not pause until I found that he was looking at me, as I thought angrily. I then asked him if singing was prohibited in the gallery. I shall never forget the way he looked at me and laughed. 'Singing—singing?' he cried. 'Ah, my sweet signorina, even if singing is prohibited you could not be charged with having transgressed. Singing!' Then he shook his head. 'But it was I who sang just now,' I explained. 'Great god Bacchus! you do not flatter yourself that that sort of thing is singing,' he cried. 'Oh no; singing is an art—and an art in which you will excel rather than in the art of painting. Fling that execrable daub in which you caricature the blessed St. Sebastian into the place where the dust is thrown, and come with me. I shall make you a singer.'"

"How amusing! And you obeyed him?"

"I stared at the old man for a minute, thinking

him the most impudent person I had ever met; but like a flash it came upon me that he was not a caretaker, but Signor Marini, the great maestro. I was so overcome with surprise that in an instant I had done exactly what he told me. I threw away the picture on which I was working—I really don't think it was so very bad—and I went away with him. He asked me where I lived, and he accompanied me there. He amazed my poor mother with what he said about my voice, or rather about the possibilities he fancied he foresaw for my voice, and he taught me for two years for nothing."

"And were his predictions regarding your voice fulfilled?"

"I am afraid he fancied that I should become much better than I am. But at any rate he made it possible for me to earn money by my singing. I hope, however, I may not have to support myself in that way. I do not like facing an audience. I had to do so twice in Italy, and I found it distasteful."

"But you do not mind facing an audience of one, I hope."

"Oh, I will sing to you all night. I sang almost every night aboard the *Andalusian*. I think Mr. Westwood liked me to do so. There was a bond between us—a bond of suffering. My dear mother had only been a month dead. I sang with my thoughts full of her."

"And there is a bond between you and me also —a bond of suffering. You will sing to me, my Clare."

Agnes had her hand in her own as they went to the drawing-room, and after a short time the girl sat down to the piano and sang song after song for more than an hour.

Her singing was the sweetest that Agnes had ever heard. She did not sing brilliantly at first, but tenderness and sympathy were in every note. No one could hear her without being affected by her. It seemed as if no one could be critical of her art: it is only when one ceases to feel that one becomes critical; but Clare made it pretty plain to Agnes when they talked together later on that Maestro Marini had never been quite so carried away by the singing of any of his pupils as to be unable to criticise it, and Agnes declared that he must be the most unfeeling man living.

Before leaving the piano the girl sang an operatic scena of the most brilliant character and amazed Agnes with the extent of her resources. She showed that her imagination was on a level with that of the great master who had built up the work to a point of sublimity that had aroused the enthusiasm of Europe. Agnes saw that Clare had at least the genius to know what the maestro meant when he had taught her how to treat the scena.

She kissed the girl, saying:

"Yes, you can always earn money by your singing; but you can always achieve much more by it: there is no one alive who could remain unmoved when you sing."

"I will sing to you every night," cried Clare. "You will tell me when I fail to do what I set out in the hope of doing in any of my songs. That, the maestro says, is the sure test of singing; if you make yourself intelligible you can sing, if you are unintelligible you are wrong. No composer who is truly great will write merely for the sake of showing what difficulties a vocalist can overcome by teaching and practice; he will not be intricate, only when he cannot express himself with simplicity. I think music is the most glorious of all the arts."

She quoted from her master as they went upstairs to their bedrooms and then kissed and parted. But though Clare was asleep within a few minutes of lying down, Agnes was not so fortunate. She lay awake for an hour thinking her thoughts, and then she rose, and wrapping a fur-lined cloak about her, sat down in a chair in front of the fire, looking into its depths.

"I cannot send her away again," she said. "I cannot send her out into the world. God has given me her life, and I have accepted the trust. I cannot send her away. He need never learn

the truth, the terrible truth. Oh, if he had but some pity! If she could but impart some pity to him!"

Another hour had passed before she rose, saying once more, in a tone of decision:

"Yes, she shall stay. Whether it be for good or evil she shall stay. If I cannot win him back I shall still have her."

Somehow, Agnes did not now feel so strongly as she had done a few days before that it was laid on her to win back Claude. The fact was that, after her last conversation with Sir Percival, she had been led to consider by what means she should endeavor to win him back to her. What were the arts which she should practise to compass this end? She had often read of the successful attempts made by young women to regain the affections of the men who had been cruel enough —in some cases wise enough—to forsake them. She could not, however, remember exactly what means they had adopted to effect their purpose. She had an idea that most of the men had been brought by force of circumstances to perceive how false-hearted the other girl was; she had a distinct recollection that the other girl played a very important part in the return of the lover to his first and only true love.

After giving some consideration to the matter she came to the conclusion that she, too, could

only trust to time to lead Claude back to her. She thought of the lines:

> "Having waited all my life, I can well wait
> A little longer."

She had spent her life in waiting for him to return to her, but he had not yet done so; the man who had gone forth loving her, and with her promise to love him, had not returned to her and her love. She would have to wait a little longer.

But somehow she did not now feel impatient to see him once again at her feet. The terrible sense of loneliness that had fallen on her when he had left her presence on the day after his arrival at the Court—that appalling consciousness of desertion—was no longer experienced by her. She awoke from her few hours' sleep on the morning after Clare had come to her, without her previous feeling of being alone in the world. Her first thought now was that in half an hour she would be seated at the breakfast-table opposite to that sweet girl who had been sent to her by a kind Fate, just at the moment when she needed her most.

Before the half hour had quite passed she was sitting opposite to Clare; and before another hour had passed she was sitting by the side of Clare in her phaeton, pointing out to her the various landmarks round that part of Brackenshire, as the ponies trotted along the road. Agnes felt as happy

as though she had succeeded in solving the problem of how to win back an errant lover.

"It's not a bit like the England of my fancy," cried Clare, when the phaeton had been driven on for some miles beyond the little town of Brackenhurst.

"Is it possible that this is the first glimpse you have had of England?" cried Agnes.

"It is practically my first glimpse of England. I could not have been more than a year old when I was taken abroad."

"And yet I am sure that you had all an exile's longing to return to England—you learned to allude to it as home, did you not?" said Agnes.

"Oh, of course, I always thought of England as home, though I managed to live very happily wherever I found myself," replied the girl. "Sometimes when I was suddenly brought face to face with a party of English men and women making a tour of Italy, my longing to be in England was easily repressed. Indeed I may safely say that at no time did I feel very patriotic. The greater number of the people whom I met painted such a picture of England as reconciled me to live abroad."

"You do not recognize the country from their description?"

"Why, they talked of nothing but fogs—they made me believe that from August to May there

was nothing but fog hanging over the whole of the country—fog and damp and rain and snow. Well, we haven't driven into a fog up to the present, and I find these furs that Mrs. Adrian advised me to buy in London, almost oppressive. The green of the meadows beside the little stream is brighter than the green of olive trees in winter. Yesterday the sky was blue, and to-day it is the same. Oh, I have become more English than the English themselves; I feel myself ready to refer to every one who is not English as a miserable foreigner."

"That is the proper spirit to acquire: I hope you will be able to retain it all through the winter. We do not invariably have blue skies and dry roads during November and December in England. But we have at least comfortable houses, with capacious fireplaces."

"That is something. I never saw a really good fire until I came to England. I have sat shivering in the house in which we lived at Siena. The little brazier of charcoal which was brought into the room for a few minutes only seemed to make us colder."

Agnes laughed, and there was a considerable pause before she said:

"And your mother. I wonder if she was quite happy living abroad all her life?"

"Only during her last illness did she express a wish to see England once more," said Clare. "Ah,

I cannot speak of it—I could not tell you all she said in those last piteous days. After she had written that letter which I brought to you—she would not allow me to see a line of it, but sealed it and put it away under her pillow—all her thoughts seemed to return to her home. Every night as I sat up with her I could hear her murmur: 'If I could only see it again—if I could only see the meadows, and smell the English may!' Ah, I cannot speak of it."

The girl turned her head away, and a little sob struggled in her throat.

"My poor child!" said Agnes. "You have all my sympathy. I can sympathise with you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THEY did not exchange a word for some time; and when the silence was broken it was by Clare.

"Just before her illness I ventured to suggest to her that we might go for a month or two to England," she said.

"And then"—

"The look that came to her face was one of fear—of absolute terror. I was frightened, and began to think that there were perhaps graver reasons than I had ever fancied for our exile. It took her some moments to recover from the shock that my suggestion had given her, and then she said, 'You must never think of such a thing as possible. I shall never see England again!'"

"Poor woman! Ah, what it is laid on woman to bear!" said Agnes. "And she would have been so happy if it had not been for her faithlessness. If she had only trusted the true man who loved her, she would have been happy. I fear that she cannot ever have been happy with your father."

"She never spoke to me of him."

Clare spoke in a low tone.

"He died when you were a child—so much, I think, was taken for granted," said Agnes.

"I have always taken it for granted," said Clare. "Oh yes; I remember asking about him when I was quite young, and my mother told me that I had no father."

"Then you must assume that he is dead," said Agnes; "and pray that you may never have sufficient curiosity to lead you to seek to know more about him."

Clare looked at her with some surprise on her face.

"What! You know"—she began.

"I know nothing," said Agnes quickly, interrupting her. "I have heard that he was not a good man, and I know that if he had had anything of good in his nature, your mother would not have parted from him. But he is dead, and we have no need to talk about him. Now let me tell you the names of all the places we can see from here."

They had driven to the summit of one of the low Brackenshire hills, and from there Agnes pointed out the various landmarks. Far away to the north the great manufacturing town of Linnborough lay beneath the great shadow of its own smoke, and to the right the exquisite spire of Scarchester Cathedral was seen, and by the side of the old minster ran the river Leet. All through the valley lay the villages of Nessvale, with its Norman church, from the tower of which the curfew is still rung; Greenledge, with its tall maypole, and Holmworth, with

its grey castle and moat. Then on every hand were to be seen the splendid park lands surrounding the manor houses, the broad meadows, the brown furrowed fields of Brackenshire, with here and there a farmhouse, and down where the Lambeck flowed, a brown mill with its slow-moving water wheel. The quacking of ducks that swam in the little stream was borne up from the valley at intervals and mingled with the melancholy whistle of a curlew, and the occasional notes of a robin sitting on a gate at the side of the road.

"England—England—this is England!" cried Clare. "I never wish to see any other land so long as I live. Ah, my poor mother! This is what she was longing to see before she died."

Agnes did not speak. She knew that the girl saw all the incidents of the English landscape through a mist of tears.

It was not until the phaeton was making the homeward circuit and had just come abreast of the wall of Westwood Court, that a word was exchanged between Agnes and Clare. All the interest of the girl was once more awakened when she learned that Claude Westwood had been born in that great house which was just visible through the trees of the park, and that he was now the owner of all.

"And the murder—it was done among those trees?" said Clare, in a whisper.

Agnes nodded.

"The wretch—the wretch! What punishment would be too great for the monster who did that deed?" cried Clare, with something akin to passion in her voice.

"Mr. Westwood told you of it?" said Agnes.

"He did not need to tell me of it," replied the girl. "I had read all about it at Cairo."

"Of course. You got the English newspapers there."

"Very rarely; strange to say, a copy of a newspaper containing a paragraph referring to the reprieve of the murderer was sent to my mother by some one in England. I saw the paper by chance. It had not been sent to her because of that paragraph, of course; but on account of some other piece of news."

"Then you knew who it was that sent the paper?"

"That was the mystery. It troubled mother for some time thinking who could have sent it."

"But she knew why it had been sent to her—she knew what was the particular paragraph it contained of interest to her?"

"I don't think that she was quite certain on that point; but she came to the conclusion that it was on account of a paragraph referring to the production of an opera in London in which a friend of mine—of ours, I mean—had taken the tenor *rôle*."

"Ah; a friend of yours? What is his name?"

"His name is Ciro Rodani; he was one of the maestro's pupils. We used to sing duets under the guidance of the maestro; it was good for both of us, he said, and so, I suppose, it was. At any rate Ciro got his engagement, and perhaps he sent mother that newspaper. He certainly sent me the six papers that praised his singing. He didn't send those that were not quite so complimentary: it was the maestro who sent them to me."

"The paper may have been addressed to you; it is not a matter of importance. You would probably never have recollected reading the paragraph about the reprieve of the man if you had not met Mr. Westwood a few months afterwards."

"I certainly should have forgotten all about it; but now—well, now it is different. And it was among those trees the terrible deed was done?"

"Yes, it was among those trees. I have not been near the place since it happened."

"It was horrible—horrible! And yet they did not hang the man—they gave the wretch his life!"

The girl spoke almost fiercely—almost in the same tone as Claude Westwood's had been when denouncing the man.

Agnes gave a little cry.

"Do not say that—for God's sake do not say that," she said. "Ah, if you only knew what you are saying!"

"If I only knew!" cried Clare, in a tone of astonishment.

"If you only knew how your indignation that a wretched man's life was spared to him shocks me!" said Agnes. "Dear child, surely you are on the side of mercy; you have not been accustomed to the savage code of a life for a life."

Clare was silent.

"It shocks me to hear any one speak as Claude Westwood does of that poor wretch," continued Agnes. "It is not possible that you— Tell me, Clare, do you think your mother would have had the same thought as you had just now? Was she indignant when she read that the life of that man Standish was spared?"

"She cried 'Thank God!' as fervently as if she had known the wretch all her life," replied Clare. "Ah, my dear mother was a better woman than I am. Her heart was full of tenderness."

"And so is yours, my child," said Agnes gently. "You did not speak from your heart just now. Your words were but an echo of those I have heard Claude Westwood speak."

There was a long silence before Clare put her hand on the arm of her companion, saying in a low voice:

"I was wrong, dear Agnes. I spoke unfeelingly, without thinking of all that my words meant. I only thought of the passion of grief in which Mr.

Westwood had expressed his indignation that the man who brought so much unhappiness into his life had been spared."

"Pray for him," cried Agnes quickly. "Pray for that man as Christ prayed for His murderers. Pray that his life may not have been given to him in vain."

"I will pray that God may pity him," said the girl. "We all stand in need of forgiveness, do we not?"

The remainder of the drive to The Knoll was silent; and so was Agnes, when she went to her room, and seated herself in front of the fire. She was breathing hard as she leant forward with her head resting on her hands. She remained motionless, staring into the glowing coals until the luncheon bell rang. Then she rose hastily, saying in a whisper:

"It was too terrible! God pity her! God pity her!"

Her maid entered the room, and she changed her dress.

While in the act of going downstairs she heard the sound of Claude Westwood's voice in the hall. He was talking to Clare in front of the blazing logs of the hall fire, and Agnes saw that he now wore the dress of a country gentleman. When he had called at the house the previous day as well as on the day after his return to England, he had worn a black morning coat. She paused beneath the

stained-glass window of the little lobby where the broad staircases turned off at right angles to the half-dozen shallow steps at the bottom—she paused, and could not move for some moments, for the scene which was before her eyes appeared to her like a glimpse of a day she remembered well: the same man wearing the same jacket and gaiters, had stood talking in the same voice to a young girl who looked up to his face as she stooped somewhat over the big grate, holding her fingers over the blaze, just as Clare was doing.

She stood motionless on the landing. The crimson roses of the stained-glass of the window made her a splendid head-dress, and in the panels on each side spread branches of rosemary—rosemary for remembrance.

Alas! she remembered but too well the words which had been spoken between the two people who had stood there long ago. "It is for you—it is all for you," he had said. "I mean to make a name that shall be in some measure worthy of you." Those were his words, and then she had looked up to his face and had put her hand, warm from the fire, into his hand. She had trusted him; and now—.

"Is it a ghost?" cried Clare, laughing. "Are you a ghost, beautiful lady, or do you see a ghost?"

She had gone along the hall to the foot of the half-dozen shallow oak steps beneath the window.

"A ghost—a ghost," said Agnes, descending. "Yes, I have seen a ghost."

Claude advanced to the middle of the hall to meet her. She greeted him silently.

"I saw your ponies in the distance and hurried after you, hoping that you would ask me to lunch," said he.

"A woman's lunch!" she cried. "You cannot surely know what our menu is."

"I will take it on trust," said he. "You represent company here. When I come to you I forget the loneliness of the Court."

When speaking he had looked first at Agnes, then at Clare. He seemed to take care to prevent the possibility of Agnes's fancying that he was addressing her individually when he said, "You represent company here."

"And you represent company to us; for the capacity of two lone women to feel lonely is quite as great as that of one man," said she, smiling in her old way.

"He brings us news, Agnes—good news," said Clare. "He has got the medal of the—the society —what was the name that you gave the society, Mr. Westwood?"

"The Geographical," said he. "They have treated me well, I must confess. They have been compelled to take me on trust, so to speak—to accept my discoveries, without any demonstration on

my part. No one knows anything of what I have seen or what I have done in Central Africa. The outline that was cabled home represented only the recollections of a missionary at Uganda. It is a little better than nonsense."

"That is the greater reason, I say, why you should take the opportunity that is offered to you now of letting the world know all that you have passed through," said Clare.

"All—all—all that I have passed through, did you say?" he cried. Then he laughed curiously.

"Well, I don't suppose that you could tell all in an hour—I suppose they would give you an hour?" said Clare.

"They might even make it two hours without forcing me to repeat myself," said he. "But all—all! Good heavens! If I were to tell all! Luckily I cannot: the language has not got words adequate for the expression of some of the things that I saw. Still—well, I saw some few things that might be described."

"Then you will go? You will give them the lecture which you say they have invited you to deliver?" cried Clare.

He shook his head.

"Oh yes, you will," she said, going close to him, and speaking in a child's voice of coaxing. "Agnes, you will join with me in trying to show this man in what direction his duty lies."

"Ah, in what direction his duty lies!" said Agnes gently. "What woman can show a man where lies his duty if his inclination points in another direction? But I am forgetting mine. Luncheon!"

She pointed to the door of the dining-room, at which the butler was standing with an aggrieved expression upon his face: luncheon had been waiting for some time.

"Duty!" said Agnes, when Clare and Mr. Westwood had passed through. "Duty!" She gave a little laugh.

CHAPTER XIX.

DUTY! That constituted the foundation of the plea of Clare for the delivery of his lecture before the Royal Geographical Society. Her eyes sparkled as she talked at lunch, urging Claude Westwood to abandon his resolution to keep a secret the story of his adventures, of his discoveries.

"My dear Agnes," she cried at last, "will you not join with me in telling him all that is his duty?"

Agnes shook her head.

"All? Did you say 'all'?" she said. "All his duty? Why, my dear, such a task would be akin to Mr. Westwood's description of his travels. The language does not contain sufficient words to tell a man all that is his duty. But so far as the lecture before the Geographical Society is concerned I don't think that he need say very much. Surely they are entitled at least to a paper in exchange for their gold medal. Anything less would be shabby."

"That should settle the question," said Clare, looking with a triumphant smile at Claude.

"I suppose—yes, I am sure that it should," said he. "Only—well, I hardly know where to begin in giving an account of some of the things I saw during my years of captivity. You have heard of the devil-worship of some parts of Central Africa;

but all that you have heard has been a faint, a far-off rumour of what that worship means. I have seen—oh, I tell you there are mysteries—magic—in the heart of that awful Continent that cannot be spoken of."

"But there is much that you can talk about—there's the country, the climate, the products," said Clare. "Don't you remember the hints that Mr. Paddleford used to give you aboard the *Andalusian*? Mr. Paddleford was a—a—gentleman—I suppose he would be called a gentleman in England."

"Though he was not so called aboard the steamer?" said Agnes.

"Exactly. He was fond of opening up new countries."

"Through the medium of the Limited Liability Companies Act—occasionally going a little further than the Act was ever meant to go," said Claude.

"At any rate he used to say that the man who found a new market for Manchester or Birmingham was the true patriot. But still you did not rise to the bait—you did not make any attempt to prove the extent of your patriotism. But perhaps you might be able to show the geographical people that Manchester or Birmingham might have what Mr. Paddleford called a 'look in' so far as Central Africa is concerned."

He glanced at Clare after she had spoken.

"Birmingham might certainly have a 'look in' at

some of the tribes; it might contract for the constant supply of brass gods for them," said Claude. "They worship brass out there with nearly as much devotion as people here worship gold. As for Manchester—well, I've been in a valley where Manchester could find a hint or two. The sides of the valley are covered with a plant—a weed which, if it became known, would make cotton valueless. It requires neither to be spun nor woven."

"And you have discovered that miracle, for which the world has been wanting since the days of Adam?" cried Clare, laying down her life and fork, and staring at him. "You have discovered this, and yet you could send that poor publisher empty away, although he had come out from England to meet you and make arrangements for the publication of your book!"

"Manchester should be ruined in order that Mr.—Mr.—was his name—Paddleford?—yes, that Mr. Paddleford might float a company," said Agnes.

"Not merely Manchester, but all the cotton-growing states of America would be brought to the verge of ruin," said he. "The growth of that weed upon the sides of the valley I speak of far exceeds the growth of all the cotton in the world. We travelled for four months through that valley without once losing sight of that weed. Things are done on a large scale in Central Africa. The ground rents there are somewhat less than they are in Middlesex.

Can you fancy a valley running from John o'Groat's to Land's End with its sides covered thickly with one weed—say with thistles only?"

"And you can tell the world of that valley—of that plant for which the world has been waiting for thousands of years, and yet there is still a doubt in your mind as to whether you should spend an hour talking about it or not!" cried Clare. "Look here, Mr. Westwood; you send a telegram to the President of the Geographical Society appointing a day to reveal to him and his friends—to all the world—the world that has been waiting for certainly six thousand years—some people say six million—for the discovery of that plant—telegraph that, or I shall do it; and when you are at the bureau of telegraphs, just send another message to the publisher who hunted for you, telling him that you accept his offer of twenty-five thousand pounds. He confided in me aboard the steamer with tears in his eyes, that this was the exact sum that he had offered to you for the making of two thick volumes on your adventures, to be ready in four months from to-day."

"Heavens above! this is carrying things with a high hand!" cried Claude. "Perhaps you would not think it too much trouble to suggest a title for the book—that, I understand, is always a difficult business."

"Ah, the representative of Messrs. Shekels &

Shackles, the publishers, confided to me his designs in regard to that point also," said Clare triumphantly. "The poor man had passed days and nights in the Mediterranean thinking over the best title for your book; but only when he got through the Red Sea did the inspiration come to him. I agreed with him that it would be too bad if all his trouble were to no purpose. I agree with him still."

"He went a long way—so did you," said Claude. "And the title—are you at liberty to divulge it to the author of the book yet unborn?"

"The name of the book is to be 'Homeless in Hades,'" laughed Clare. "So much the agent confided in me. He thought that by that title the readers would be prepared for the worst you had to tell them."

"And so they would, I'm sure," said he. "But I had no idea that the names of books were settled by the publishers."

"Oh, they're not as a rule—he explained that to me; he said that only in your case Messrs. Shekels & Shackles were under the impression that you should know just what the public expected from you."

"And their idea is that the writer of a book of travels should make it his business to provide the public with precisely what they expect? Well, I can't say that the notion is an extravagant one. Most of the volumes of travel which have been

written, from the days of Sir John Mandeville, down, have shown a desire on the part of the authors to accommodate themselves to the views of the publishers and the public. I'm not so sure, however, about 'Homeless in Hades.'"

"Then you will write the book?" cried Clare, her eyes sparkling. "Oh yes; when you begin by quarrelling with the title you are bound to write the book."

"I don't consider myself in the least compromised in the matter," said he. "One may surely object to a title without being forced to write the book. The fact is that, since I started for the Zambesi, the public taste has been revolutionised by dry plates. An explorer without a camera is, in the eyes of the public, like—now, what is he like?—a mouse-trap without a bait—a bell without its hammer. Now I did not travel with a camera. My long journey alone through the forests was made with only the smallest amount of personal luggage. All I was able to carry with me will not make an imposing list. Item—one knife; item—one native bow and six poisoned arrows; item—six seeds of the linen plant."

"What, you succeeded in bringing home the seeds of that wonderful plant?"

"I made up my mind to accomplish that at all hazards. The seeds are a good deal less interesting to look at than the native weapons. I have got a

glass case made for the arrows. They are not the things that should be left lying about."

"I have heard of poisoned arrows. Terrible, are they not? And the poison is still in those you have?"

"It is the deadliest poison on earth; and its effect remains even in the ashes of the iron-wood which forms the barb of the arrow. The slightest scratch with the point of the weapon is fatal."

Clare listened breathlessly. It was in a low voice that she asked:

"How many of these arrows had you when you contrived to escape?"

"I had sixteen," he replied. "I can account satisfactorily for the ten that are not forthcoming. I got to be a fairly good hand with the bow and arrows before I had been in captivity for more than a year. I saw that my only chance of successfully escaping lay in my acquiring a thorough knowledge of the native weapons. I made a collection of arrows which I secreted at intervals, but when I thought my chance had arrived, I only recovered the sixteen I have told you about. I saved my life ten times with arrows and nine times with my knife."

"That will be your book," said Clare; "how you used those ten arrows will be your book. It must be called 'The Arrows and the Knife.'"

"That title is certainly better than 'Homeless in Hades,' although I admit that I was homeless and

that the country was the worst Hades that could be imagined."

"But you will write the book—oh, you must promise us to write the book. If we get him to promise we shall be all right, Agnes; he is not the sort of man who would ever break his promise!"

"Oh, no, no; a promise with him would ever be held sacred," said Agnes.

"Promise—promise," cried Clare, going in front of him with clasped hands, in the prettiest possible attitude of humorous imploration.

"A book of travel would be of no value without illustrations—so much I clearly perceive," said he. "I wonder if you can draw."

"Oh yes; I can draw in a sort of way," she replied. "I did nothing else but draw for some years."

"That is a solution of the problem," he said, putting out his hand to her. "I will write the book if you do the drawings for it."

She shrank back for a moment and her face became rosy.

"Oh, I don't think that I could draw well enough to illustrate your book," she cried.

"Ah, have you seen the illustrations to any book of travel recently published?" he asked. "No, I thought you had not or you wouldn't say that your capacity fell short of so humble a standard as is required for such a purpose. My dear Clare, cannot

you see that the plan which I have suggested is the only one possible for such a work as mine? I must have an artist beside me who will be able to draw everything from my instructions. Nothing must be left to the imagination. An error in any point of detail would make the illustration worthless. Ah, now you see it is not on me but on you that the production of the great work depends, and yet you hold back. It is now my turn for bullying you as you bullied me. It rests with you to say whether the book will appear or not."

"What am I to say, Agnes?" cried the girl. She had become quite excited at the new complexion that had been assumed by the question of publishing the book. "What am I to say? I am afraid of my own shortcomings."

"If Mr. Westwood is not afraid of them, you certainly need not be," said Agnes. "For my own part I quite see how much better it would be for him to have an artist working by his side and in accordance with his own instructions, than it would be to have the most accomplished of draughtsmen working at a distance."

"I'm fearfully afraid, but I would do anything for the sake of seeing the book published," said Clare.

"Then the compact is made," cried Claude. "Give me your hand, Clare. Now, Agnes, you are witness to the compact."

"Yes, I am a witness to this compact—the second one made in this room," said Agnes quietly. They had by this time left the dining-room and were standing round the fire in the drawing-room.

"The second compact—the second?" said he, as though he were trying to recall the previous compact.

"Agnes alludes to the compact she and I made in this room yesterday," said Clare. "We agreed that if we did not become friends we should part without ceremony before we got to hate each other —it was something like that, was it not, Agnes?"

"Yes, I think that is an excellent definition of the compact made between you and me—not in the presence of witnesses," said Agnes.

"A very sensible compact, too, if I know anything about women," said Claude.

"And you do know something about women, do you not?" said Agnes.

"I am learning something daily—I may say hourly," he replied. "I have learned lately how generous, how noble, how sympathetic a woman may be."

He looked at Agnes as he spoke, and sincerity was in every note of his voice.

Agnes smiled faintly. She wondered if he was thinking of the day when he had said good-bye to her in that room. Was his allusion made to her generosity in permitting him to assume that there

was a statute of limitation in love—an unwritten law by which the validity of a lover's vows ceased?

At this point a fresh visitor was admitted—Sir Percival Hope. He said he was very glad to meet Mr. Westwood that afternoon, the fact being that he had just been at the Court to see Mr. Westwood in order to inquire about his gamekeeper, Ralph Dangan, who had applied to him, Sir Percival, for a situation. He wondered why the man was leaving the Court preserves.

"The man seems to me to be a very foolish fellow," said Claude. "He came to me a couple of days ago to discharge himself, his plea being that he did not suppose that I meant to preserve as my poor brother had done. I asked him if he didn't think it possible that he might be mistaken in his supposition, and suggested that he would have done well to come to me in the first instance to learn what my intentions were in regard to the preserves. He seemed to decline to enter into any discussion with me on the subject, but quite respectfully gave me his notice to leave. I tried to bring him to a sense of his foolishness in throwing up a good place on so ridiculous a pretext, but all the reply he gave was, 'I have made up my mind to go, sir, and must go. I can't stay where I am any longer.'"

"The poor man has had trouble—great trouble, during the past few months," said Agnes. "He should be pardoned if he finds it intolerable to con-

tinue living in the place where he was once so happy."

"He did not say anything about that to me," said Claude. "Only to-day my steward mentioned about the man's daughter. Poor girl! I recollect her years ago—a pretty little girl of nine or ten. And then his son enlisted. I daresay the view you take of the matter is the right one, Agnes. I suppose such men as Dangan have their own private feelings like the rest of us."

"He did not seem inclined to explain to me anything of that," said Sir Percival. "When I asked if he did not think he was behaving foolishly in leaving a situation in which he had been for over thirty years, he merely said he had made up his mind to leave it."

"I would advise you to give him a trial," said Claude. "He is a scrupulously honest man."

"I feel greatly inclined to take your advice," said Sir Percival.

He remained to drink tea with Agnes, and at the end of an hour both men left together.

CHAPTER XX.

CLARE was greatly excited. She regarded it as a great triumph that she had prevailed upon Mr. Westwood to write the book which was to give an account of his captivity in Central Africa, his explorations—some of them involuntary—for the people among whom he dwelt as a prisoner and an object of worship, carried him about with them on their raids—and his discoveries. She was, however, in great dread lest her part in the compact should be indifferently performed.

She daily expressed her doubts to Agnes, bewailing the fact that she had been too easily persuaded by the maestro to abandon her study of the art of painting for the art of vocalism. If she had only devoted to the former the time she had spent upon the latter, she would have been a good artist, she declared. Of what value had her singing been to her, she inquired in doleful tones. It had been of no use to her, but if she had continued her study of drawing, she should not now be on the fair way to humiliation.

Agnes did her best to reassure her, when she had seen her portfolio of water colour sketches—some of them charming open-air studies and others

of the picturesque peasantry of the Biscayan provinces. She felt sure, she said, that if her drawings done by the direction of Mr. Westwood, were of the same quality as those in the portfolio, the publishers would be quite satisfied with them. Clare kissed her friend a dozen times in acknowledgment of her kind encouragement, but afterwards she shook her head despondently.

"It is one thing to draw for my own amusement—to make these simple records of the places which I have visited and the people I have seen, but quite another thing to illustrate a serious book—a book that is worth twenty-five thousand pounds. Just think of it! My drawings in a book that is worth such a sum—a book that will be in everybody's hands in the course of a month or two!" she cried, as she paced the room excitedly. "Oh yes; I know what every one will say: It would be far better if so valuable a book had not had its pages disfigured by such amateurish efforts! Oh yes; I have seen the criticisms in the English papers. I know what they will say. Oh, what a fool I was to agree to do the drawings!"

"I don't think that you need be at all afraid to face such a task," said Agnes. "But if you are, why not write to Mr. Westwood, telling him that you repent?"

"Oh, I would be far more afraid to face him after that than to face the drawings," cried the girl.

"What would Mr. Westwood think of any one who would break a compact?"

Agnes looked at her in silence for a few moments. She was tempted to tell Clare the full story of the compact which she had once made with that man, and the way in which he had broken it, ignoring the fact that it had ever been entered into by either of them. She felt tempted to ask her if the susceptibilities of such a man on the subject of compacts—especially those made with women—were to be greatly respected; but she controlled herself, and when Clare sat down with tearful eyes, she did her best to comfort her.

Then Claude went to London and had an interview of a very satisfactory character with Messrs. Shekels & Shackles. All that they stipulated was that he should not give himself away—the phrase was Mr. Shekels'—at the Royal Geographical Society. The papers read by distinguished—travellers—and some who were not quite so distinguished—at the big meetings of the Society, were only designed to stimulate the imagination of the public and prepare the way for the forthcoming book. A paper that discounted any portion of the forthcoming book—Mr. Shekels took it for granted that the book was always forthcoming—was worse than futile for advertising purposes. He urged upon Mr. Westwood the advisability of putting nothing into his Geographical Society lecture that the newspa-

pers could not lay hold of for the purposes of leading articles. The newspapers did not want pathological erudition. They wanted something that all their readers could understand—something about cannibalism, for example; cannibalism as a topic never failed to attract general readers. He hoped that Mr. Westwood would see his way to talk about the cannibals of Central Africa in his paper. That would tickle the palates of the general public, causing them to look forward to the book, which need not necessarily contain a single allusion to cannibalism. In one word, Mr. Shekels explained that the lecture should be a kind of *hors d'œuvre* to the literary banquet which was to follow.

All this he explained to Mr. Westwood, very tenderly, of course, for Mr. Westwood was (unfortunately, Messrs. Shekels & Shackles thought) not like the majority of distinguished explorers, anxious that the sale of his book should be enormous, being (unfortunately, again,) independent of book-writing for his living. If they were to say anything to hurt his feelings, he might take his book, when he had it written, to another publishing house, who then would have the privilege, so earnestly sought after by Messrs. Shekles & Shackles, of losing a considerable sum by its publication.

On the subject of the illustrating of the book Mr. Shackles—he was the artistic, not the business partner—had a good deal to say. He did not smile

when Mr. Westwood mentioned that there was a lady of his acquaintance who would execute the drawings under his own supervision. No, Mr. Westwood was well out of the front door before he had a laugh with his partner, who did not laugh but only winked at the notion of Mr. Westwood's lady friend. But while Mr. Westwood was in his room Mr. Shackles explained quite courteously that he should like to see some of the lady's work, so that he should be in a position to judge as to whether or not it lent itself well to the processes of reproduction. That was how Mr. Shackles gave expression, when face to face with Mr. Westwood, of the doubts which he afterwards formulated in a few well-chosen phrases to his partner as to the artistic—the saleably artistic—possibilities of the unnamed lady's work.

Then Mr. Westwood had an interview with the executive of the Royal Geographical Society on the subject of his lecture; and the next day every newspaper in the kingdom contained a paragraph announcing this fact, and most of them had half-column leading articles commenting upon the decision come to by the explorer, and pointing out that, owing to the extraordinary circumstances connected with his involuntary stay in the interior of the Dark Continent, the paper which he had so courteously placed at the disposal of the Society could scarcely fail to be the most interesting, as

well as the most important, given to the world through the same body for many years.

It was with great trepidation that Clare submitted her sketches to Mr. Westwood. He had, of course, to pay another visit to The Knoll in order to make a choice of the works to be sent to Mr. Shackles as specimens; and even when Claude had expressed himself confident that Mr. Shackles would be surprised at the high quality of the technique in those he selected, the girl was not reassured. It was not till Claude had shown her the publishers' letter regarding the drawings—another visit had to be paid to The Knoll in order to show her this letter—that she began to regain confidence in herself. Her face was rosy with pleasure before Claude had finished reading the letter.

The fact was that Messrs. Shekels & Shackles had come to the decision that they would be acting wisely in humouring Mr. Westwood in this matter of illustrations; and seeing that the specimens of Miss Tristram's work were susceptible of being improved by a judicious artist accustomed to manipulate such work as was to be reproduced by certain processes, the letter on the subject had been as nearly enthusiastic as Messrs. Shekels & Shackles ever allowed themselves to become in the presence of their typewriter. They had meant to gratify Mr. Westwood, and the reply which they got from him convinced them that their object was achieved.

For the next week Clare spent her days in the greenhouse, making sketches of all the tropical plants in Agnes's collection. From studying the general character of the illustrations in several volumes of African travel—Agnes had on her shelves every volume of exploration in the Continent—the girl became aware of the fact that the public will not believe that any drawing is offered to them in good faith unless it contains at least one tropical plant with which they are familiar. She made up her mind that the vegetation in her pictures should be plentiful, however far short it might fall in artistic qualities. This was the week during which Claude was occupied in the preparation of his paper for the Geographical Society; but in spite of his being so busy, he found time to pay more than one visit to The Knoll. His were business visits, he was careful to explain. Yes, it was necessary for him to see that the backgrounds sketched by Clare at least suggested the tropics.

Agnes stood by while he made his suggestions at these times, and when, now and again, she was applied to for an opinion on some point on which the others could not make up their mind, she gave her opinion—that was all the part she took in the transaction. She was beginning to be weary of the vegetation of the tropics and its adaptability to pictorial treatment, though for some years of her life she had passed no day without reading a page

or two that had some bearing upon Central Africa. She was startled as she reflected upon the change that had taken place in her views during a fortnight. She never wished to see another book on Central Africa. She could not even do more than pretend to take an interest in the book which Claude was about to write and Clare to illustrate.

Once as she heard him describe to the girl a scene which he thought she should be prepared to deal with in a picture, her mind went back to the nights when she had awaked shrieking from a dream in which she had seen him lying dead in the midst of the savages who had massacred him and his companions. She had had such dreams frequently during the months when the newspapers were writing their comments upon the disappearance of Westwood and his expedition. How feeble and colourless would be the most spirited of Clare's illustrations compared to those dreams! She smiled as she recalled some of them. She wondered how it was possible for her ever to have taken so much interest in African exploration. It was certainly not a subject that many girls would pass several years of their life trying to master.

Often when she glanced across the room and saw Claude there she asked herself if it was possible that she still loved him.

She could not answer the question. Her love for him had become so much a part of her life she

could not imagine living without it. She wondered if women could continue loving men who had treated them as he had treated her. When she thought over his treatment of her she wondered how it was that she did not hate him. She had heard of love turning to hatred—hatred as immortal as love—and yet it did not appear to her that she had such a feeling in regard to him. She seemed to have settled down into her life under its altered conditions as easily and as uncomplainingly as if she had always looked forward to life under such conditions.

It was on the eve of Claude Westwood's departure for London to appear before the Geographical Society, that Clare sat down to the piano. She had latterly neglected her singing in favour of her drawing, and now only opened the piano at the request of Agnes.

"What shall I sing?" she cried. "I feel just now as if I could make a great success at La Scala —I feel that my nerves are strung to the highest pitch possible, though why I should be so is a mystery to me. It is not I who have to appear in that big hall to-morrow evening, and yet I feel as if I were about to make my *début.*"

She ran her fingers up and down the keys, improvising a succession of chords that sounded like a march of triumph.

"I want to sing something like that—something

with trumpets in it," she said, with a laugh. "I feel in a mood for trumpets and drums. You heard what Mr. Westwood said about the musical instruments of the Gakennas—that awful drum made of rhinoceros hide pared down and stretched between two branches? What an awful instrument of torture!"

"Shocking, indeed—nearly as bad as a pianoforte under incompetent hands—probably worse than a brass orchestra made in Germany," said Agnes. "Don't let your song be dominated by any influence less cultured than Chopin."

Clare went on improvising, but gradually the notes of triumph became less pronounced, and the modulation was in a minor key. In a short time the random fancies assumed a definite form; but it was probably the chance playing of a few notes that suggested to her the exquisite "Nightingale" theme, so splendidly worked out by her master—the greatest of all Italians.

"You and I, you and I,
Sisters are we, O nightingale.
On the wings of song we fly—
On the wings of song we sail;
When our feathered pinions fail,
Floats a feather of song on high
Light as thistledown in a gale.
You and I the heaven will scale;
For only song can reach the sky.
Only the song of the nightingale;
And we are sisters, you and I,"

She fled away on the wings of the exquisite song, startling Agnes with the passion which she imparted to every note—a passion that waxed greater with every phrase until at the close of the stanza it became overwhelming. The music of the moon is embodied in every note, though the master was too artistic to make any attempt to reproduce the nightingale's song. He knew that no such attempt could ever approach success; but he knew that it was within the scope of his art to produce upon the mind the same effect as is produced by the song of the nightingale, and this effect he achieved.

Agnes listened with surprise at first, for the girl had never sung with such *abandon* before; but at the plaintive second stanza—the music illustrated another effect of the bird's singing—she half-closed her eyes, and gave herself up to the delight of listening. At the third stanza—Love Triumphant, the composer had called it—she became more amazed than before. The theme takes the form of a duet, as the scena was originally arranged by the composer, and now it actually appeared to Agnes as if the tenor part was being sung as well as the soprano, in the room—no, not in the room, but in the distance—outside the house.

She raised her head and listened eagerly. There could be no doubt about it—some one was singing at the window the tenor part of the duet.

CHAPTER XXI.

CLARE was absorbed in her singing—she seemed to be quite unaware of the fact that there was anything unusual in the introduction of the second voice—indeed she appeared to be unconscious of everything but the realisation of the aims of the composer.

Agnes did not make any attempt to interrupt her, and the duet went on to its passionate close. But so soon as the last notes had died away, the phrase was repeated, after a little pause, by the singer outside.

> "Beating against dawn's silver door,
> Thy song has fled over sea, over sea;
> Morn's music to thee is for evermore—
> But what is for me, love, what is for me?"

The passionate cry was repeated with startling effect. But not until the last note had sounded did Clare spring from her seat at the piano. She stood in the centre of the room in the attitude of an eager listener. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were still tremulous with the tears that evermore rushed to them when singing that song. She listened, but no further note came from that mysterious voice. The night was silent.

The girl turned to Agnes; a little frown was on

her face, but still it was roseate, and she gave a laugh.

"I did not think that he could possibly be so great a fool," she said, as if communing with herself.

"A fool!" cried Agnes. "Is it possible that you know who it is that sang? I thought that I was dreaming when I first heard that voice; and then—but you know who it is?"

"He said he would follow me to England—to the world's end," laughed Clare. "Oh, these Italians have got no idea of things—the serenade needs an Italian sky—warmth and moonlight and the scent of orange blossoms, and the nightingale among the pomegranates. The serenade is natural with such surroundings; but in England, toward the end of November—oh, the notion is only ridiculous! He will have a cold to-morrow that may ruin his career. His tenor is of an exceptional quality, the maestro said: it cannot stand any strain, to say nothing of the open-air on a November night. What a fool he is!"

"You have not yet told me what his name is," said Agnes.

"What? Surely I told you all about Ciro Rodani?"

"Some weeks ago you mentioned the fact that you had a friend of that name, and that he had taken a part in an opera produced some time ago,

and sent you a newspaper with an account of—of his success. You did not say that he was still in England."

"He didn't remain in England. He was in Paris when I last heard of him. He must have learned from Signor Marini that I was here. The maestro is the only one who knows my address. Oh, how silly he has been!"

Agnes threw herself back in her chair and laughed. But Clare did not laugh—at first. On the contrary, she flushed and frowned, standing in the middle of the room. At last she laughed in unison with Agnes, as the latter said:

"What a pretty little romance I have come upon all at once! Ah, my dear, I wondered how it was possible for you to remain in Italy so long without making victims of some of that susceptible nation. Poor Signor Rodani! But it was only natural. You studied together the most alluring of the arts—he a tenor, you a soprano. That is how the operas are cast, is it not? The tenor is invariably paired off with the soprano. But alas, he is not always such a marvel of fidelity as your friend outside. By the way, I hope he is not still in the garden. He will not form any exaggerated idea of English hospitality if we allow him to remain outside on so cold a night; but still, it is very late—too late for a couple of lone women to entertain a visitor, especially when that visitor is an operatic tenor."

"Oh, he has gone away, you may be sure," said Clare. "Besides, he should know that houses in this country have knockers and bells. Why shouldn't he behave like a civilised person though he is a tenor?"

"I'm afraid that you've become sadly prosaic since you arrived in England," said Agnes. "Where is the romance in behaving like ordinary people? Knockers and bells are for prosaic people; the serenade and the guitar are for operatic tenors. I shouldn't wonder if your friend did a little in the guitar line also."

"He does a great deal in it," laughed the girl. "Thank goodness he spared us the guitar."

"The thought of a young man going out in cold blood to serenade a young woman on a November night is too terrible. I only hope he does not travel with one of those wonderful silk rope ladders which play so important a part in the lyric stage."

"Goodness only knows," said Clare, shaking her head despondently. "When there's a romantic man at large nobody can tell what may happen."

"Is it possible that you do not respond with the least feeling of tenderness to such devotion?" said Agnes. "Is it possible that you have the courage to run counter to the best established traditions in this affair? Think of your duty as a soprano."

"I thought that I had given him a sufficient answer long ago," said Clare, frowning. "He has fancied himself in love with a score of the girls

who sang duets with him. Girls, did I say? Why, I heard that he was continually at the feet of Madame Scherzo before he saw me, and the Scherzo has sons older than he is, and besides—well, she isn't any longer what you'd call slim."

"No, she wasn't even slim when I was a girl," said Agnes. "But, my dear, you must remember that a tenor is a tenor."

"Somebody once said that a tenor was a malady," said Clare. "I do wish that this particular complaint had remained in Milan. Heavens! Why should I be troubled with him just when I need to give all my thoughts to my work? He is sure to come back to-morrow, and this time he will ring the bell."

"You can scarcely refuse to see him," said Agnes. "But are you really certain of yourself? Are you sure that you have no tender regard for him?"

"I think I am pretty sure," replied the girl. "I never was in the least moved by his sighs and his prayers—I was only moved to laughter—when he wasn't near, of course. If I had laughed when he was present he would have killed either me or himself."

"The only way by which a girl can be certain that she does not love one man is to be certain that she loves another," said Agnes. "I wonder if Signor Rodani has a rival?"

She glanced at Clare's face: it was blazing. The

laugh she gave was a very uneasy one. Agnes became interested. Seeing these signs she rose from her chair, and went across the room to the girl, laying her hands on her shoulders, and looking searchingly down into her face. Clare, however, declined to meet her gaze. She only glanced up for a second. Then she turned to one side and laid a hand on the keys of the piano, pressing them down so gently as to produce no sound.

Agnes laughed as she raised her hands from the girl's shoulders.

"I am answered," she said. "You have told me all that your heart has to tell. I will ask you nothing more. Oh, I wondered how it was possible for so sweet a girl as you to escape."

Clare sprang to her feet and threw her arms about the neck of her friend, hiding her roseate face on her shoulder.

"I'm afraid that you have guessed too much," she whispered. "I did not mean to confess anything—I have not even confessed to myself; but you took me so by surprise. Please do not say anything about my foolishness—it really is foolishness. You will let my secret remain a secret—oh, you must, my dear Agnes; I tell you truly when I say that it was a secret even to myself, until your question surprised me, so that I could not help— But I have told you nothing—you will assume that I have told you nothing?"

"I will assume anything you please, my dearest child," said Agnes. "You may trust to me to keep your secret; I will not refer to it, even to yourself. But what about the unhappy Signor Rodani? Is he to return to Italy without seeing you?"

"Oh, I will see him at any time," cried Clare, making a gesture of indifference which she had acquired in Italy. "I do not mind in the least seeing him face to face. What have I to fear from him? There never was any one so foolish as he is."

"I hope he will find his way to the bell-pull," said Agnes; "although I frankly admit that there is much more romance in approaching the object of one's adoration by a serenade than by a bell-pull, still—I suppose he would be shocked if I were to ask him to dine with us."

"Why should you ask him to dine with us?" said Clare.

"Well, when a distinguished stranger comes to our neighbourhood"—

"He would only fancy if he were asked to dinner that I had not made up my mind. He would think that I was merely coquetting with him—that I was anxious to have him still hanging about; and that might spoil his career in addition to its being very unpleasant to myself. No, let him come: I will put him out of pain at once. I am sure that is the most merciful course to pursue in regard to sentimental lovers who are gifted with supersensitive

tenor organs. If poor Ciro does not suffer from his escapade to-night he may be tempted to come again upon a rainy night—and where would he be then?"

"I am sure that you take the most merciful view of the case," said Agnes. "Alas! that one should be compelled to talk of the dismissal of a lover as one talks about the lethal chamber!"

"Oh, my dear Agnes," cried Clare, "if you had ever been one of a class of vocalists in Italy you would not talk about a little incident such as this is, as an equivalent to the lethal chamber. I wonder if there are any other employments that have such an effect upon the—the—well, let us say the nerves, as the art of singing. My experience is that a singing class is a forcing house of the affections. I only found out after I had been with the maestro for two years, that it was his fun to throw all of us together so that our wits might be sharpened—that was how he put it. What he meant was that we all sang best when we were in love with one another. Heaven! the scenes that I have witnessed! A *tenore robusto* used to sharpen his knife on the stone steps so as to be ready to cut the heart out of the *basso profundo*, who was unfortunate enough to fancy himself in love with the *mezzo-soprano*."

"What an interesting experience! But what a shocking old man your master must have been!" laughed Agnes.

"Oh, he cared about nothing but to advance us in our knowledge of the art of expressing the emotions by singing. How could we know how to interpret a passion which we had never felt, he used to ask."

"So he encouraged the tenor to put a fine edge on his knife, hoping that he would have a better idea of interpreting his revenge when he had cut the heart out of the bosom of his brother artist? Yes, I'm afraid that though an estimable exponent of the art of vocalism, your maestro was lacking in some of the finer principles of the moralist."

"He took nothing into consideration except his art," said Clare. "He admitted to me that he liked to see his pupils miserable, for only then could they be depended on to do justice to themselves. He made mischief between young people only that he might study them when blazing with revenge. He has reproduced for me an entire scena founded on a lover's quarrel that he himself brought about."

"So cold-blooded an old wretch could not be imagined!" cried Agnes. "And yet he could compose so transcendent a theme as the 'Nightingale'! Oh, my dear Clare, one feels that this art is a terrible thing after all."

"I feel that I have wasted my time with Signor Marini," said Clare. "What would I not give now to have studied drawing as I studied singing!"

"You are still afraid of attacking those illustra-

tions? I wonder how the maestro would treat your mood in his music?"

"My mood has been dealt with long ago," cried Clare. "It is in the opera of 'Orféo'—the despair of Orpheus when he was longing for the unattainable. Oh, I would make a splendid Orpheus at the present moment." She almost flung herself down on the piano seat and struck a chord; but she only sang a phrase or two of the marvellous lament "Che farò senz' Eurydice?" Her voice was choked. She sprang from her seat and threw herself into the sympathetic arms of her friend. Only for an instant did she remain there. With a long kiss and a rapid "Good-night" she hurried from the room.

Agnes was left alone to try to put a coherent interpretation upon her mood. She commenced her task with smiles, thinking of the sentimental young Italian who had not shrunk from the attempt to adapt a serenade to an English November; but before long her smiles had vanished. She sat thinking for a long time; and yet the whole sum of her thoughts found no wider expression than the sigh which came from her as she said:

"Poor child! poor child! May she never know the truth! That is my prayer for her to-night."

CHAPTER XXII.

"He may come at any time," cried Clare, after breakfast the next morning. "But I shall be prepared for him. Why will men be so foolish? Why should he follow me to England in the month of November? Has he no regard for his voice? Where would he be if he failed to do the C natural some day? And yet he is foolish enough to run the risk of ruining his career simply for the sake of impressing me with his devotion!"

There seemed to Agnes to be a note of hardness in the girl's way of speaking about her unhappy lover. Her intolerance of his devotion seemed a trifle unkind.

"Don't you think that he should have your sympathy, my dear?" she asked. "Do you fancy that he is to be blamed on account of the shortcomings in Signor Marini's system? Surely he is more to be pitied than blamed for falling in love with some one who refuses to respond to him?"

Clare made a little impatient movement, but in another second she became penitent, and hung her head.

"I suppose I should be sorry for Ciro," she said,

mournfully. "Yes, I think I do feel a little pity for him, in spite of his sentimental foolishness. Undoubtedly the maestro was to blame. I know that it was he who encouraged the susceptible Ciro in spite of all that I could say. But why should the foolish boy single me out for his adoration when he knew very well that there were four soprani and three contralti in the class who were ready to catch the handkerchief whenever it might please him to throw it? They all worshipped him. I could see it plainly when he got upon his upper register, with now and again a hideous falsetto D; and yet nothing would content him—he must lay his heart at my feet. Those were his words; don't fancy that they are mine."

"Even so, you should not be too hard on him," said Agnes. "Ah, my dear Clare, constancy and devotion in a man are not to be lightly considered. They may be part of a woman's nature—it seems to be taken for granted that they are part of a woman's nature; but they certainly are no part of a man's. That is why I am disposed to say a good word for our friend with that sweet tenor voice."

"What am I to do?" cried Clare. "I must either tell him the truth—that I am quite indifferent to him; or make him believe what is untrue—that I am not without a secret *tendresse* for him. Now, surely I should be doing a great injustice to him—yes, and to the score of young women who

worship him—if I were to encourage him to fancy that some day I might listen to his prayer."

"There is no question, my Clare, as to what course you should pursue," said Agnes. "All that I would urge upon you is not to hurt him more than is absolutely necessary."

"You are thinking of the lethal chamber again," said Clare. "Never mind; what you say is quite true, and I shall endeavor to treat him so gently that he will leave me feeling that he has been complimented rather than humiliated. After all, he means to pay to me the greatest compliment in his power, poor fellow."

"And you will show him that you appreciate it?"

"I will do my best."

Before they had had their little chat the bell sounded.

"I knew that he would become prosaic enough to pull the bell like an ordinary mortal," said Clare. "Of course you will remain by my side, Agnes. Even a sentimental Italian cannot expect to enter a lady's house surreptitiously."

It was not, however, Signor Rodani who was shown into the room, but Mr. Westwood. He was wearing a great fur coat, and was actually on his way to the railway station. He was to read his paper to the Society at night, and had merely looked in at The Knoll to say good-bye to his friends.

This was the explanation he offered to account for his visit at so irregular an hour. He had under his arm a small case containing all the trophies which he had succeeded in bringing from the land of his captivity—the small bow, the poisoned arrows, and the seeds of the linen plant. The bow and arrows were in a glazed case, which was locked. The more precious seeds were carefully wrapped in wadding. Neither Agnes nor Clare had seen these trophies before, though Claude Westwood had frequently alluded to them after that first day on which he had spoken about his travels through the wonderful forest.

"I shall make a very poor display on the platform, I fear," said he. "I remember the first African lecture at which I was present. The explorer appeared on the platform surrounded by his elephant rifles, his lions' skins, his elephants' tusks, his rhinoceros' skulls, his countless antlers. He made an imposing show—very different from what I shall make with my half-dozen arrows and my few seeds. I'm afraid that the people will take me for a fraud. The idea of a man going to Central Africa, and returning after a nine years' residence, with nothing better than these, will seem a little foolish in many people's eyes."

Clare was indignant at the suggestion that any one would venture to underrate the achievements of an explorer who had come through the most terrible

parts of Africa with no arms that would give him an advantage over the natives. And as for the trophies, what were all the discoveries of all the explorers in comparison with the seeds of the linen plant, she asked.

"I knew that I could trust to you to say something encouraging to me," cried Claude. "That is why I could not go up to London without first coming to bid you good-bye, and to get you to wish me good luck."

"Good luck—good luck—good luck!" said Clare, as he wrapped up his case of arrows. "Of course, we wish you all the good luck in the world; the fact being that our fortunes are bound up with yours. Was it not Agnes and I who insisted on your promising to write that book?"

"I am quite content that you should look on our fortunes as bound up together," said he, slowly and with curious emphasis. "Our fortunes are bound up together"—he had taken her hand, and continued holding it while he was speaking. "Our fortunes—what is my fortune must be yours."

"That is quite true, for am not I your illustrator?" cried Clare. "The book will be a success, and no matter how bad the pictures may be, they will be part of a successful book."

He looked at her for a few moments and then said good-bye to her and Agnes. Agnes had not opened her lips throughout the interview. She could not

help thinking, as she watched him go down the drive, of the marvellous change that had come over him since the day of his return to Brackenshire—the day when he had paid her that visit during which he had been able to talk of nothing except the man who had murdered his brother. A few weeks had been sufficient to awaken the ambition which she had thought was dead. It seemed to her that he had just left the room, saying the very words that he had spoken years before:

"I will make a name worthy of your acceptance."

She stood at the window of the room so lost in her own reflections that she did not hear the ringing of the bell or the announcement of the new visitor. She only became aware of the fact that Clare was talking to some one in the room. She supposed that Claude had returned for some purpose, and was quite surprised to see the half-bent figure of an under-sized man, who wore an exceedingly neat moustache, and a tie with long flying ends.

He remained for a long time in the attitude of some one giving an exaggerated parody of an over-polite foreigner.

"This is Signor Rodani," said Clare: and the young man straightened himself for a second, and bowed once again, even lower than before. And now he had both his hands pressed together over the region of his heart. Agnes felt as if she were

once again in the act of taking a lesson from her dancing master. It seemed a poor thing after such a flourish to inquire if Signor Rodani found the day cold.

She spoke in French, that being the language in which Clare had presented him. The young man bowed once again—this was the third time to Agnes's certain knowledge, though she fancied he must have indulged in more than a nod before she had become aware of his presence—and begged leave to assure Madame—he called her Madame—that the weather was very charming. She then ventured to remark that now and again in England the latter days of November were fine, and then inquired if he meant to winter in England; at which he gave a slight start, and Agnes felt sure his lips shaped themselves to pronounce the word "Diable!" He did not utter the word, however; he only gave a smile and a shrug, and said that a winter in England was not in his mind at that moment; still—it depended.

She interpreted his smile and his shrug into a sort of acknowledgment that if it were made worth his while he might even be induced to consider the possibility of his wintering in England.

She then saw him looking imploringly but politely at Clare, and it occurred to her that the sooner he was left alone for the girl to explain to him whatever matters might stand in need of an expla-

nation, the more satisfactory it would be to every one. So without telling him how greatly she had enjoyed his singing of the tenor part in the "Nightingale" duet the previous evening, she made a very feeble excuse for leaving the room. She had an idea that Signor Rodani would not be severely exacting in regard to the validity of her excuses: he would be generous enough to accept as ample any pretext she might offer for leaving him alone with Clare.

When he straightened himself after bowing her to the door, he allowed Agnes to perceive that Clare was certainly a full head taller than he was.

For the next quarter of an hour any one passing the drawing-room door might have heard the sound of a duet (*parlando*) being delivered in the musical Italian tongue within that room. As a matter of fact some impassioned phrases made themselves heard all over the house. Then there was heard a quick opening of the door; a few words of bitter but highly musical upbraiding, sounded in a man's, though not a very manly, voice, and before the bulter had time to get to the hall-door the hall-door was opened, and Agnes saw the figure of Signor Rodani on the drive. He was hurrying away with a considerable degree of impetuosity, and he held a brilliant coloured handkerchief to his eyes.

"He is gone," said Clare, when Agnes returned to the room in the course of the next half-hour.

"I saw him on the drive," said Agnes. She noticed that Clare kept her head carefully averted for some time; but when she happened to glance round, Agnes saw that she had been weeping. The handkerchief of Signor Rodani was not the only one that had been requisitioned for the purpose of removing the traces of tears. She was pleased to observe that little tint of red beneath the girl's lashes: it told her that she was not so hard-hearted as she had tried to make Agnes believe.

"He is gone, so that nothing further need be said about him, except that, if he gets within observing distance of the Maestro Marini within the next week or so—I suppose it will take a few weeks to bring him to himself again—he may make the good maestro aware of some of the shortcomings in the working of his system," said Agnes.

"I wonder it never occurred to us to go up to London to hear the paper read at the Geographical Society to-night," said Clare; and Agnes was startled at the suddenness with which she flung aside Signor Rodani as a topic and began to talk of Mr. Westwood.

"We could scarcely go without an invitation, and Mr. Westwood certainly never offered to procure tickets for us," said Agnes.

When they had nearly finished their dinner that night, the French clock on the bracket chimed the

half hour. Clare dropped the spoon with which she was eating her jelly.

"Half-past eight; he will be beginning to read his paper now," she said. "How I wish I were at the Albert Hall! I can hear the people cheering him—I suppose they will cheer him, Agnes?"

"If you can hear them cheering, my dear, you may take it for granted they are cheering him," said Agnes, smiling across the table at her.

Clare laughed.

"Oh yes, they will cheer," she said.

"I daresay they are about it now," said Agnes. "I don't quite know how long the people as a rule keep up their enthusiasm to the cheering point in regard to a man who has achieved something. I believe they have been known to cheer a great soldier for an entire month after his return from adding a country about the size of France to the Empire. They may cheer Mr. Westwood, although he has been at home for more than a month. I don't think, however, that he would have been wise to keep in seclusion for many more days. An Arctic traveller who is likely to turn up shortly will soon shoulder him aside."

"Oh, Arctic exploration is a very poor thing compared with African," said Clare. "What good was ever got by going to the North Pole, I should like to know?"

"The person who went very close to it made as

much money during the year after his return as should keep him very comfortably for the rest of his days, I hear," said Agnes. "The North Pole did him some good, if his excursion was a complete failure from a scientific standpoint. However, the people cheered him for coming back safe and sound, and I think that for the same reason you may assume that they are cheering Mr. Westwood at the present moment."

And so they were. The London newspaper which was received the next morning made at least that fact plain. Clare was waiting at the hall door to receive it from the hand of the messenger from the book-stall, and she was tearing off the cover as Agnes came down the stairs to breakfast, and before the coffee had been poured out Clare had found the series of headings that marked the report of Mr. Westwood's lecture, delivered in the Royal Albert Hall, at the invitation of the Royal Geographical Society.

"Here it is," she cried. "'Mr. Westwood at the Albert Hall—Thrilling Narrative—the Hebrew Ritual in Central Africa—The Linen Plant.' But they only give three columns to the lecture while they have devoted seven to—to—you will not believe it—but there is the heading: 'The Chancellor of the Exchequer on Bimetallism'—just think of it—Bimetallism! As if any one in the world cares a scrap about Bimetallism! Seven columns! What a fool-

ish paper! But the cheers were all right. 'The intrepid explorer on coming forward was greeted by enthusiastic cheers from the large and distinguished audience who had assembled to do him honour. Several minutes elapsed before Mr. Westwood was permitted to proceed with his paper.' Oh, we were not mistaken; the cheers were all right."

"Your coffee will be cold," remarked Agnes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SOME days had passed before Claude Westwood was able to return to the Court. He seemed now to be as anxious for publicity as on his landing in England he had been to avoid it. He was daily with Messrs. Shekels & Shackles completing his arrangements with them for the production of his book, so as to preclude the need for another visit until he had written the last page of the manuscript. He did not want to be disturbed, he said, while engaged at the work; and Messrs. Shekels & Shackles cordially agreed with him in thinking that he should be allowed to give all his attention to the actual writing of his narrative, without being worried by any of the technical incidents of presenting it in book form to the public.

They urged upon him the advisability of losing no moment of time in settling down to his work. Already a valuable month had been thrown away, they reminded him; and although, happily, the reports from the North were to the effect that the winter had set in with such severity as to make it practically impossible for Mr. Glasnevin, the Arctic explorer, to free himself from his ice-prison before the spring, so that his formidable rivalry would not

interfere with the popularity of Mr. Westwood, still they had heard that another gentleman might be expected any day from the Amazon. This gentleman, in addition to a narrative of two years' residence among the Indians of the Pampas, would, it was reported, be able to give the public photographs of the injuries which had been inflicted on him by his captors, who were known to be the most ingenious torturers in the world. They feared that if this gentleman got home during the winter his arrival would seriously interfere with the sale of Mr. Westwood's book. They could only hope, however, that the Foreign Office would take up the case of the traveller at the Amazon, for that would mean the indefinite postponement of his liberation, so that Mr. Westwood would have the field to himself.

Without waiting to say whether or not he took the same bright and cheery view of the freezing in of the Arctic explorer or of the operation of the British consular system in regard to the tortured gentleman in South America, Mr. Westwood promised to do his best for his optimistic if anxious publishers, and so departed.

He regretted, however, that he could not see his way to dictate to a shorthand writer a dozen or so interviews with himself which could be judiciously distributed among the newspapers at intervals, so as to keep his name prominently before a public

who are ever ready to throw over one idol for another.

It was probably his strong sense of what was due to his publishers, that caused him to hasten to The Knoll on the very day of his return to Brackenshire. It was perfectly plain from the comments on his lecture, which had already appeared and were appearing daily in the newspapers, that the discoveries made by him in Central Africa had become the topic of the hour. Why, even Brackenhurst had awakened to find that a famous man was residing in its neighbourhood, and when one's native place is brought to acknowledge one's fame, which all the rest of the world is talking about, one may rightly feel that one is famous. Therefore, as Mr. Westwood explained to Agnes and Clare, it was necessary for him to start upon his book at once.

He wasted as much time explaining this as would have been sufficient to write a chapter; and in the end he did nothing except invite them to dine at the Court on the following night, in order that they might talk more fully on the question of the need for haste.

"Do you think that it is necessary to waste time discussing the advisability of not wasting time?" asked Agnes; and immediately Clare turned her large eyes reproachfully upon her; there was more of sorrow than reproach in Claude's eyes as he

looked at her. She met their eyes without changing colour.

"Oh, of course, I know that I am quite outside the plans of you workers," she continued. "It is somewhat presumptuous for me to assume the position of your adviser on a purely literary question, so I shall be very happy to dine at the Court."

"Thank you," said Claude. "I have been out of touch for so long with English society I have almost forgotten their traditions; but I don't think that I am wrong in assuming that no work of any importance, either charitable or social, can be begun without a dinner. Now, without venturing to suggest that our work—Clare's and mine—is one of supreme importance, I do not think that it would be wise for us to ignore the custom which tradition has almost made sacred—especially when it is in sympathy with our own inclinations. We'll take care not to bore you, Agnes," he added. "I met Sir Percival Hope just now, and he promised to be of our party."

"Now!" cried Clare, in a tone that seemed to suggest that Agnes could not possibly have further ground for objection.

Agnes raised her hands.

"I am overwhelmed with remorse for having made any suggestion that was not quite in keeping with your inclinations," she said.

She and Clare accordingly drove to the Court on

the next evening, and found Sir Percival in one of the drawing-rooms talking to his host on the subject of the recent poaching in the coverts of the Court and also on Sir Percival's property. The poachers were getting more daring every day, it appeared, and Ralph Dangan's vigilance seemed overmatched by their cunning so far as Sir Percival's preserves were concerned. Sir Percival said that his new gamekeeper accounted for the recent outbreak on the ground that neither of the proprietors had displayed the sporting tastes of the previous holders of the property, and the poachers thought it a pity that the pheasants should become too numerous.

Claude smiled as Sir Percival made him acquainted with his late gamekeeper's theory.

"It is very obliging on their part to undertake the thinning down of my birds," said he, "and if I could rely on their discretion in the matter all would be well. I am afraid, however, that one cannot take their judgment for granted; so that whenever Dangan thinks that our forces should be joined to make a capture of the gang, I'll give instructions for my keepers to coöperate with him."

At dinner, too, the conversation, instead of flowing in literary channels, was never turned aside from the question of poaching and poachers. Sir Percival's experiences in Australia had no more changed his views than Claude Westwood's ex-

periences of Central Africa had altered his, on the subject of the English crime of poaching.

Agnes had not been within the house since the week preceding the tragedy that had taken place in the grounds surrounding it. She had had no idea that she would be so deeply affected on entering the drawing-room. But the instant she found herself in the midst of the beautiful old furniture that had been familiar to her for so many years, she was nearly overcome by the crowd of recollections that were brought back to her. She put out her hand nervously to a sofa and grasped the back of it for an instant before moving round it to seat herself.

She felt herself staggering, but hoped that no one had noticed her apprehension, and when she had seated herself she closed her eyes. It seemed to her that she was in a dream. She heard the sound of voices, but not the voices of any one present, only the voices of those who were far away; and it seemed to her that among them was the Claude Westwood whom she had known and loved so many years ago. She had suddenly become possessed of the strange dream fancy that the man who had taken her hand on her entering the room was the man who had killed both Dick Westwood and his brother Claude.

Happily the conversation was only about the poachers, so that she could not be expected to take

part in it; and during the five minutes that elapsed before dinner was announced, she partly recovered herself. But the shiver which came over her when she opened her eyes was noticed by Clare.

"What, you are cold?" she whispered. "Come to the fire; you can pretend to be pointing out the carving of the mantel to me."

Agnes shook her head and smiled. She knew that just at that moment she had not strength to walk to the fireplace, and she did not under-estimate her own powers; when, however, the butler appeared at the door, and Claude came in front of her, she was able to rise and walk into the dining-room by his side.

After dinner Clare showed the greatest possible interest in the drawing-rooms and their contents, and Agnes, who was, of course, familiar with everything, told her much about the furniture and the pictures. For a century and a half the Westwoods had been a wealthy family, and many treasures had been accumulated by the successive owners of the Court. But there was one picture on an easel which Agnes had not seen before. It was a portrait of Dick Westwood, and it had been painted by a great painter.

Agnes and Clare were standing opposite to it when Claude and Sir Percival entered the room; they had only remained for a few minutes over their wine. Claude came behind Agnes, saying:

"You did not see that until now? I am sure that it is an excellent likeness, and the face is not, after all, so different from poor Dick's as I remember him."

"It is a perfect likeness," said Agnes. "But I cannot understand how you got it. It is not the sort of portrait that could be painted only from a photograph."

"He did not tell you that he was giving sittings to the painter when he was last in London?" said Claude.

"He never mentioned it," said Agnes.

"I brought it with me from the painter's studio the day before yesterday," said Claude. "He wrote to me the day before I left for London, explaining that Dick had given him a few sittings in May, and had promised to return to the studio in July. He said he should like me to see the portrait in its unfinished condition. Judge of my feelings when I found myself facing that fine work. I carried it away with me at once." Then he turned to Clare, saying, "Look at it; it is the portrait of the best fellow that ever lived—that ever died by the hand of a wretch whom he had never injured—a wretch who is alive to-day."

Agnes moved away from the picture with Sir Percival; but Clare remained by the side of Claude looking at the face on the easel.

"How you loved him!" Agnes heard her say in a low voice.

"Loved him—loved him!" said Claude Westwood. He gave a little laugh as he took a step or two away from the picture. "Loved him! I love him so dearly that"—

Agnes looked with eager eyes across the room. She waited for Clare to say a word of pity for the man whose life had been spared, who had been given time to repent of his dreadful deed, but that word remained unspoken.

For the second time that evening a shiver went through Agnes. Sir Percival watched her as she watched the others across the room. There was a long interval of silence before Claude began to talk to the girl in a low voice, and shortly afterwards went with her through the *portière* that divided the two drawing-rooms.

"I want Clare to see the picture of Dick and myself taken when he was ten and I was eight—you know it, Agnes," he said, as he followed Clare. The next minute the sound of his voice and Clare's came from the other room.

Sir Percival had been examining the case containing the poisoned arrows which lay on a table; but now he stood before Agnes.

"You have seen it," he said. "I know that you have seen it as well as I. Is it too late to send her away?"

Agnes started.

"It cannot be possible that you, too, know it,"

she said. "Oh no; you cannot have become acquainted with that horrible thing."

"I must confess that I never suspected it before this evening," said he. "But what I have seen here has been enough to tell me all that there is to be told."

She stared at him in silence for a few moments.

"What have you been told?" she asked at last.

"You cannot have failed to learn the truth," said he. "You cannot have failed to see that Claude Westwood is in love with that girl."

With a little cry she had sprung to her feet and grasped his arm.

"No, no; not that—not that!" she whispered. "Oh no; that would be too horrible!"

"It is horrible to think that a man can forget all that he has forgotten. Good heavens! After eight years! Was ever woman so true? Was ever man so false?"

"I have been blind—blind! Whatever I may have thought, I never imagined this. He met her aboard the steamer—he must have become attached to her before he saw her with me."

She was speaking in a low voice and without looking at him. He remained silent. She walked across the room with nervous steps. Several times she passed and repassed the picture on the easel, her fingers twitching at the lace of her dress.

Gradually then her steps became firmer and more

deliberate. The sound of a rippling laugh came from the other room. She stopped suddenly in her restless pacing of the floor. She looked at the portrait on the easel, and after a short space, she too laughed.

"It is a just punishment!" she said. "He loves her and she loves another—she confessed it to me. He will be punished, and no one will pity him."

Then Clare reappeared in the arch from which the curtain had been drawn, and Claude followed her.

Agnes glanced first at the girl, then at the man. She looked toward Sir Percival and smiled.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It seemed to her that there was something marvellously appropriate in the punishment which was to be his, and she would not stretch out a hand to avert it. He who had made her to suffer for her constancy to him was about to suffer for his cruelty to her. Her love had brought suffering to her, and it was surely the justice of Heaven which had decreed that his new love was to mean suffering to himself.

She could not feel the least pity for him; on the contrary, she felt ready to exult over him—to laugh in his face when the blow had fallen upon him. She felt that she should like to see him crushed to the earth—overwhelmed when he fancied that his hour of triumph had come. Only this night did the desire to see him punished take possession of her. She wondered how it was that she had been so patient in the face of the wrong which he had done to her. When she had flung down and trampled on the ivory miniature of him which had stood on her table, she had wept over the fragments, and the next day she had been filled with remorse. She had seen him many times since that day, but no reproach had passed her lips, for no reproach had been in her heart. She had merely thought of him

as having ceased to love her whom he had promised to love. But now when she stood alone in her room, knowing that he had not merely forsaken her but had come to love another woman, her hands clenched and her heart burned with the desire of revenge.

A few hours before, she had been shocked by his desire to be revenged upon the wretch who had killed his brother; but she did not think of this as she paced her room in the sway of that sudden passion which had come to her. She felt exultant in the thought of his coming humiliation. It was the justice of Heaven overtaking him. She would laugh in his face when the blow fell upon him.

An hour had transformed her. She had flung her patience and her forbearance to the winds. She hated herself for the folly of her fidelity all those years; but she did not think of Clare with any feeling of jealousy. On the contrary, she felt that the girl was an ally. Without Clare the man would escape all punishment; but with her as an ally he would be crushed.

She was too excited to sleep when at last she got into bed. The rush of this new, strange passion carried her along, and she experienced that positive pleasure of yielding to it, which a release from all trammels of civilisation brings for a time to most people of a healthy nature. She had in a moment been released from the strain which she had put

upon herself for so long. She felt that she was a woman at last—a woman carried along by the most natural of woman's impulses: a passion for revenge. After all, such constancy as had been hers was an agony and not a pleasure. Claude Westwood had spoken the truth: it should be taken for granted that after the lapse of a certain time the validity of a promise made in love ceased.

She told him so much the next day, when he called at The Knoll to see Clare. The girl had gone to Brackenhurst to try to obtain some materials in which she had found her store deficient—a special sort of tracing paper, the need for which Claude had told her of on the previous evening.

Agnes noticed how his face clouded when he learned that Clare was not in the house. She wondered how it was that she had never before seen signs of his new attachment. A few minutes had been sufficient to make Sir Percival acquainted with the truth. And yet it was generally assumed that in such matters women were much more sensitive than men. Could it be that the womanliness in her nature had been blunted by her unnatural constancy?

This was her sudden thought on noticing the disappointment on his face.

"You will wait for her?" she said. "She has been gone some time; she is sure to return very shortly. Brackenhurst has not so many shops as should occupy her for long."

"Perhaps I had better wait," said he. "I want to make a start upon the book. My shorthand writers are coming to me to-morrow."

"They will save you a great deal of trouble, I am sure," said Agnes. Their conversation could not be too commonplace, she thought. "You will take a seat near the fire? I am so sorry that Clare is out."

There was a considerable pause before he said:

"After all, perhaps it is as well for her to be out. The fact is, my dear Agnes, I have been wishing to —to—well, to have a chat with you alone about Clare—yes, and other matters. The present is as good an opportunity as I am likely to have."

"What can you possibly want to say to me?" said Agnes, raising her eyebrows.

"What? Well, apart from the fact that you and I were once—nay, we are still the best of friends, I think it but right to tell you that I—I—oh, what a strange thing is Fate!"

"Is it not?" said Agnes, with a little smile. "Yes, I have often wondered that that remark was not made by some one long ago. Perhaps it was."

The note of sarcasm was scarcely perceptible in her words; and yet it seemed as if he detected it. He gave a quick glance toward her; but she looked quite serious.

"Was it not Fate that brought her here after I fancied I had seen her for the last time?" said he.

"Would it not save you a great deal of trouble —a good deal of stoic philosophy, if you were to come to the point at once and tell me that you fell in love with Clare Tristram when you were sailing down the Mediterranean with her by your side, that you were overjoyed to see her here, and that, although quite six weeks have passed, your constant heart has not changed in its affection for her? Is not that what you mean to say to me?"

"What, have I worn my heart upon my sleeve?" he said, giving a little laugh. "Have you read my secret?"

"Your secret? Do you really fancy that there is any one in this neighbourhood to whom your secret is still a secret? I'm convinced that the servants have been talking about nothing else for the past fortnight. Jevons, the butler, is too well trained to give any sign, but you may depend upon it that the housemaids nudge each other every time you call. You see, they know that you cannot possibly be calling to see me, and therefore they assume— Psha! what's the need to talk more about it? I can understand everything there is to be understood in this matter, except why you should come to tell me about it. What concern is it of mine?"

He looked at her rather reproachfully. He was not accustomed to hear her talk in such a way. She had accustomed him to gentleness and words in

which there was no tone of reproach. He felt disappointed in her now.

"I felt sure that you would be at least interested in—in"—

"In—shall we call it the wondrous workings of Fate? If you think that I am not interested in Fate you are greatly mistaken."

"I don't like to hear you talk in that strain, Agnes. It jars upon me. You were always so gracious—so sweet."

"How do you know what I was?"

"Cannot I remember you long ago?"

"I do believe we did meet now and again before you left England. What a memory you have, to be sure!"

He rose from his chair and stood beside her.

"My dear Agnes," he said, "I remember all the past. Were ever any two people so unfortunate as we were? I have often wondered if we were really in love with each other. I know that I, for one, fancied that we were. If all had gone well and I had returned at the end of the year I meant to spend at the Zambesi, we—well, we might have got married. But, of course, it would be absurd to fancy that, after so many years . . . as I told you when I returned, we are physically different people to-day from what we were some years ago, and in affairs of the heart nature decrees that there is a Statute of Limitations. It would be cruel, as

well as unjust, for a man to hold a woman to a campact made nearly nine years before—made, be it remembered, by practically a different woman with a different man. That is why I regarded you as free from every obligation to me. If you had got married after I had been absent for two years, do you fancy that I would have blamed you? Oh no; I have too strong a sense of what is just and reasonable."

"Will you sell your book at thirty-two shillings for the two volumes?" she asked after a long pause. "I read in some paper the other day that people will pay thirty shillings for a book, if they want it, quite as readily as they will pay ten."

He was too startled to be able to reply to her. The inconsequence of her question was certainly startling. After the lapse of a minute, however, he had sufficiently recovered himself to be able to say:

"Yes, I believe that thirty-two shillings will be the published price. Personally I cannot understand how people should want to buy the book in such numbers as will make it pay; but I suppose Shekels & Shackles are the best judges of their own business."

He thought that, on the whole, he had reason to be satisfied at the result of their interview. He had for some days an uneasy feeling that before he could confess to Clare that he loved her, he should make a further attempt to explain to Agnes—well,

whatever there was left for him to explain. He had now and again felt that it might actually be possible that she expected him to regard the compact made between them nearly nine years before, as still binding on him. This would, of course, be rather absurd on her part; but, however absurd women and their whims might be, they were capable at times of causing men a good deal of annoyance; and thus he had come to the conclusion that it would be wise for him to have a few words of reasonable explanation with her. He had great hopes that she would be amenable to reason; she had always been a sensible woman, her only lapse being in regard to this matter of fancying—if she did fancy—that in love there is no Statute of Limitations.

Now and again, however, he thought that perhaps he was doing her an injustice in attributing to her such a theory. She might, after all, look on the matter from the same standpoint as he did; still, he thought it might be as well to define as fully as he could his views in regard to their relative positions.

Well, a very few minutes had been sufficient for his purpose, and here he was, talking with a light heart about the peculiarities of the public in the matter of book-buying.

He had not exhausted this interesting topic when Clare appeared, ready to take her instructions regarding the first of the illustrations which she was

to draw. He had long ago described to her so thoroughly the characteristics of several of the wild tribes among whom he had lived, she could have no difficulty in dealing with some of the scenes pictorially. He jotted down for her the particulars of the various incidents which he thought should be illustrated, and within half an hour she was hard at work.

When he called the next day he was delighted with the progress which she had made. She worked in a bold, free style which was certainly very effective, and he was unable to suggest any alteration in her pictures of the natives. So well had she remembered his instructions that she had never once confused the head-dresses of the Subaki warriors with those of the Aponakis. He told her that in the morning she would receive from one of his secretaries the type-written copy of the chapters which he had already dictated to the shorthand writers. For the remainder of the day he would be in the hands of his cartographer, for, as a matter of course, the volumes were to contain maps of those portions of the interior which he had discovered.

Agnes watched him leaning over her lovingly as she worked at one of her drawings. She watched him and smiled. She knew that the more deeply he fell in love with the girl, the greater would be the blow that he should receive when she told him that she loved another man. Only once the thought oc-

curred to her that perhaps Clare might be carried away by constant association with him, and by the glamour of the countless newspaper articles that appeared on the subject of his work as an explorer; so when they were going upstairs that night she said:

"You made a very pretty confession to me a few days ago, my Clare."

"A confession?"

"On the day you were visited by your friend, Signor Rodani."

"Oh!"

The girl's face had become rosy in a moment.

"Does your heart remain faithful? You do not think you are likely to change?"

"Oh, never, never!" cried Clare. "I may be foolish, but if so, I must remain foolish. Ah, my dear Agnes, my confession was forced from me—I spoke on the impulse of the moment; but I was not the less certain of myself."

"I think you are a girl to be depended on," said Agnes. "You are not one of those whose fancies change with every new face that comes before them. Good-night, my dear child."

She was now assured of his punishment. As she thought of the way he had come to her, smiling as he repeated that phrase which he had invented—it had become quite a favorite phrase with him—that about the Statute of Limitations in affairs of love,

she felt that no punishment could be too great for him. He had talked of Fate in extenuation of his faithlessness. She had heard of people throwing all the blame that was due to themselves upon Fate. When a pretty face comes between a man and his duty he calls it Fate and yields without a struggle.

Well, he would soon find out that Fate had not yet done with him.

Two days later Clare got a letter from him asking her if she would see him immediately after lunch. He had got some technical instructions to give to her from the publishers; but he had been so closely occupied with his secretaries, he had not been able to call at The Knoll the previous day.

Immediately after lunch Agnes found it necessary to go in haste to the village; so that Clare was left alone in the room which had been turned into a studio.

When Agnes returned in a couple of hours, she found the girl, not in the studio, but in the drawing-room. The wintry twilight had almost dwindled away. The room was nearly dark. The gleam of a white handkerchief drew her eyes to the sofa, upon which Clare was lying, her face upon one of the cushions.

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" she cried. "Why are you lying there? What—tears?"

Clare sprang to her feet, touched her eyes once

more with her handkerchief, and then flung it away. In another instant she was in Agnes's arms.

"Oh, my dearest," she cried, "I am only crying because I am so happy. Never was any one so happy before since the beginning of the world. He has been here."

"Who has been here—Mr. Westwood?"

"Of course. Who else was there to come? Who else is worth talking about in the world? He has been here, and he loves me—he loves me—he loves me! Only think of it."

"And you sent him away?"

"Not until I had told him all that was in my heart."

"You told him that you loved another man?"

"How could I do that? How could I tell him a falsehood? I told him that I loved him; that I had always loved him, and that it would be impossible for me to love any one else."

CHAPTER XXV.

"Now you know why it is I was crying," said Clare, and as she spoke she laughed. "Oh, I am crying because I am the happiest girl in the world," she continued. "Was there ever any one so fortunate in the world? I don't believe it. I thought that the idea of my hoping that he would ever come to love me was too ridiculous—and it is ridiculous, you know, when you think of it—when you think of me—me—a mere nobody—and of him—him—the man whose name is in every one's mouth. Ah! I think it must be some curious dream—no, I feel that I have read something like it somewhere—there is a memory of King Cophetua in the story. Was he here—was he really here? Why do you stare at me in that way? Ah, I suppose you think that I have suddenly gone mad? Well, I don't blame you. The whole story sounds absurd, doesn't it?"

Agnes had taken a step or two back from the girl and was gazing at her. The expression that was on her face as she gazed had something of amazement in it and something of fear. Her lips moved as if she were trying to speak; but at first her words failed to come. When, at last, they became audible, there was a gasp between each word.

"You said—you told me—twice—yes, twice—

that you loved some one else—some one— Oh, my God! I never guessed that it was he—he"—

"Why, who else should it be? When he came beside me aboard the steamer—yes, on the very first day we met—I knew that my fate was bound up with his."

"Fate—Fate—that was his word, too. Fate!"

"I felt it. I felt that even if he had never thought of me I should still be forced to follow him till I died. And how strange it was—but then, everything about love is a mystery—he told me just now, in this very room, that he had just the same feeling. He said he felt that Fate"—

"Ah, Fate again—Fate!"

"And why not? My dearest Agnes, there is a good Fate as well as an evil one. How unjust men are! When anything unhappy takes place, they cry out against Fate; but when anything good happens, they never think of giving Fate the credit of it! We are going to change all that. I have already begun. I feel that I could compose the Fate theme—something joyous—ah, what did I say the other evening? —something with trumpets in it—that is what my Fate theme would be: pæans of joy rushing through it."

"That is what the lover thinks, the lover who has not got the eyes of Fate—the eyes that see the end of the love and not merely the beginning."

"But love—love—our love—can have no end.

Love is immortal; if it were anything less it would cease to be love."

"Poor child! Poor child! You have fathomed the mystery of Fate, and now you would fathom the mystery of Love. You will tell me in a few minutes all there is to be known of Love and Fate."

"My dearest Agnes, your words have a chill about them, or is it that I am sensitive at this moment? A whisper of an east wind over a garden of June roses—those were your words—I am the June roses. Oh no; I am not in the least conceited —only June roses."

She laughed as she made a gesture of dancing down the room.

Agnes's gesture was not one of merriment. She put her hands up to her face with a little cry that turned the girl's rapture of life to stone.

"What—what can you mean?" she said, after a long silence.

Agnes looked at her for a moment, then turned away from her, and walked slowly and with bowed head to the fire.

"Punishment—his punishment—I meant it to be his punishment," she whispered. "I did not think of her—I did not mean her to share it—she is guiltless."

She bent her head down upon the coloured marbles of the high mantelpiece, and looked into the fire.

Clare came behind her, laying a hand carelessly upon her shoulder.

Agnes started and shrank from the touch of her hand.

"Do not caress me," she said. "I was to blame. It was I who should have seen all that every one else must have seen; I should have seen and warned you. I should have sent you away—taken you away before it was too late. I should have stood between you and him. But I was selfish—blinded by my own selfishness."

"Why should you have stood between us?" asked the girl, with a puzzled expression. "Oh, you cannot possibly be talking about him and me: no one in one's senses would talk about standing between us. Heavens above! Ah, tell me that you do not mean him and me—to stand between Claude and me? I warn you before you speak that nothing that lives—no power of life or death—shall stand between us. If he were to die I should die too. I know what love is."

"And I know what Fate is. My poor child, my poor child! You have done no wrong. You are wholly innocent. If you go away you may still save yourself—yourself and him."

The girl laughed again.

"For God's sake don't laugh; let me entreat of you," cried Agnes, almost piteously.

"My poor Agnes," said Clare, "I pity you if you

have any thought that you can separate us now. I will not ask you what is on your mind—what foolish notion you have about a *mésalliance.* Of course I know as well as you can tell me that yesterday I was a nobody; but I am different to-day. I am the woman that Claude Westwood loves, and if you fancy that that woman is a nobody you are sadly mistaken."

"Child—child—if you knew all!"

"I don't want to know all—I don't want to know anything," said Clare. "I assure you, my dear Agnes, that I have no curiosity in my nature on this particular point. He loves me—that is enough for me. I don't want to become acquainted with any other fact in the universe. Any one who fancies that—that— Oh, my dear Agnes, do you really suppose that Claude Westwood—the man who fought his way from the clutches of those savages—the most terrible in the world—the man who fought his way through the long forest of wild animals, deadly serpents, horrible poisonous unshapely creatures never before seen by the eye of man—and the swamps—a world of miasma, every breath meaning death—do you really suppose that such a man would allow any power to stand between him and the woman whom he loves? Think of it—think of the man and what he has done, and then talk to me if you can of any obstruction lying in our way to happiness,"

"I pity you—I pity you! That's all I can say."

"You have no reason to pity me. I am the happiest girl in this world—in this world?—in any world. Heaven holds no happiness that is greater than mine. Ah, my dearest, you have been so kind to me—you and Fate—I have no thought for you that is not full of love. What woman would do as you have done for me? Who would be so kind to a stranger—perhaps an impostor?"

"I wish to show my kindness now; that is why I entreat of you, with all my soul, to leave this place—never to see Claude Westwood again."

Clare was at the further end of the room, but when Agnes had spoken she returned slowly to her side.

"Agnes," she said, in a low and serious voice, "Agnes, if you wish me to leave your house I shall do so at once—this very evening. You have the right to turn me out—no, I do not wish to make use of such a phrase. I should say that you have a right to tell me that your plans do not admit of my being your visitor longer than to-night; and, believe me, I will not accuse you of any lack of courtesy or kindness toward me. I shall simply go away. But if you tell me that I am to forsake the man who loves me and whom I love, I shall simply tell you that you know me as imperfectly as you know him."

"As imperfectly as I know him!" said Agnes, slowly. Her eyes were upon Clare as she spoke;

then she went to the window and looked out. There was a pause of long duration before the girl once again moved to her side, saying:

"Dear Agnes, cannot you see that in this matter nothing that you might do or say could move me? If you were to tell me that he is a criminal—that he is the wickedest man living, I should not change in my love for him."

"I pity you, with all my soul," said Agnes. "And if the time comes when you will, with bitterness and tears, admit that I warned you—that I advised you to place between you the broadest and deepest ocean that flows—you will hold me blameless."

"I will admit that you have done your best to separate us," said Clare, smiling, as she put an arm round Agnes. Her smile was that of an elder sister humouring a younger. "And now we will say no more about this horrid affair, if you please. We shall be to each other what we were before Claude Westwood came here to disturb us."

"God help you!" said Agnes, suffering her cheek to be kissed by the girl.

She went into another room, and as she went she fancied that she could hear Clare laughing—actually laughing at the idea of anything coming between her and love for Claude Westwood. She sank down upon a sofa and stared at a picture that hung on the opposite wall.

"She will not hear me—she will not hear me; and now it is too late to make any move," she said. "I meant that he should be punished, but God knows that I never meant that his punishment should be like this! And she—poor child! poor child! Why should she be punished?"

She remained seated there for a long time thinking her thoughts, racked with self-upbraiding at first, whispering, "If I had but known—if I could but have known!" But at the end of an hour she had become more calm. The darkness of the evening obscured everything in the room in which she sat, but she did not ring for a light. It was in the darkness that she stood up, saying, as if to reassure herself:

"It is not my punishment, but the punishment of Heaven that has fallen on him. It is not I, but Heaven, whose hand is ready to strike. It is the justice of God. I will not come between him and God."

She dined, as usual, face to face with Clare, and there was nothing in the girl's manner to suggest that she had taken in the smallest measure to heart anything that Agnes had said. She did not even seem to have thought it worth her while to consider the possibility of her warnings having some foundation. She had simply smiled at them—the smile of the indulgent, elder sister. Her warning had produced no impression upon her.

She was full of the details of her work. She had not been idle during the afternoon, she said. Oh no; every hour was precious. And then she went on to tell of the fear that had been haunting good Mr. Shackles—the fear lest the Arctic winter might be less rigorous than the best friends of Mr. Westwood (and Mr. Shackles) could wish, thereby making possible the return to England of the distinguished explorer, who, it was understood had been devoting all his spare time and tallow in the region of ninety degrees north latitude —or as near to it as he could get—to the writing of a book. Mr. Shackles's dread was lest the Arctic regions should shoulder Central Africa out of the market—a truly appalling cataclysm, Clare said, and one which should be averted at any sacrifice.

Agnes listened to her, as the doctor listens to the prattle of the patient who, he knows, will not be alive at the end of the week. She listened to her, making her own remarks from time to time as usual, but, even when she and Clare were left alone together, alluding in no way to the fact that they had had a conversation in the afternoon on the subject of Mr. Westwood.

The next day Claude appeared at The Knoll. He did not go through the hall into the studio. He thought it only polite to turn into the drawing-room, where the butler said Miss Mowbray was to be found.

She had scarcely shaken hands with him before he said:

"Clare has told you all, I suppose?"

"She told me that you had confessed to her what you confessed to me," said Agnes.

"What I confessed to you?" he repeated in a somewhat startled tone. "What I confessed—long ago?"

"Well, that is not just what I meant to say," replied Agnes. "You confessed to me a few days ago that you had fallen in love with her. But curiously enough, the way you took me up serves to lead in the same direction. Only you were, of course, a different person altogether in those days: we change every seven years, don't we?"

"I am the luckiest man alive!"—said he, ignoring her disagreeable reminiscence. "I am no longer young and my adventures have told on me, and yet—I am sure you told her that you considered me the luckiest man living!"

"I told her that if she wished to be happy she should put an ocean between you and herself."

His voice was full of reproach—a kind of grieved reproach, as he said:

"You told her that? Why should you tell her that? Is it because of the past—that foolish past of a boy and girl"—

"No: I was not thinking of the past; it was of the future I was thinking," she said.

"The future?"

"Yes; and that is what I am thinking of now when I implore of you to leave her—to leave your book—everything—and fly to the uttermost ends of the earth to escape the blow which is about to fall upon you."

"I am sorry that I cannot see my way to take your advice," said he. "I do not share your fears for the future. But whatever Fate may have in store for me, of one thing I am assured: the hardest blow will seem as the falling of a feather when she is beside me. I am sorry that you, my oldest friend— But I am sure that later on you will change your views. No one knows better than I do that such a girl as she might reasonably expect to have a younger man at her feet; but I think I know myself, and I am sure that I shall be to her a sympathetic husband."

He had gone to the door while he was speaking.

"You will wish that you had never seen her," said Agnes.

"Will you force me to wish that I had never seen you?" he said, in a low voice. He had not yet lost the tone of reproach which he conceived to be appropriate to the conversation that had originated with her.

This last sentence stung her. For a moment she felt as she had done on that night when she had flung down his miniature and trampled on it. Her

face became deathly pale. But she controlled herself.

"I will answer that question of yours another time," she said quietly.

He returned to her.

"Forgive me for having said what I did," he cried. "I spoke thoughtlessly—brutally."

"But I promise you that I will answer you, all the same," said she. "Clare is in her studio."

CHAPTER XXVI.

It seemed as if Clare had resolved to treat the singular words which Agnes had said to her as soon as she had told her of Claude Westwood's confession and her reply, as though they had never been uttered. Whatever impression they produced upon the girl she certainly gave no sign that she attached even the smallest amount of importance to them. Her mood was that of the rapturous lover for some days. She had never been out of temper since she had come to The Knoll, except for a few moments after her friend Signor Rodani had visited her; but she had never been in the rapturous mood which now possessed her. Her life was a song—a lover's song.

The labour of love at which she was engaged daily kept her indoors. Drawing after drawing she executed for the book, and even those task-masters, Messrs. Skekels & Shackles, expressed themselves thoroughly satisfied with the progress of the book and the "blocks." The latter were found to be admirable; in fact, the reproductions were, Clare affirmed, better than the originals. She was not mistaken. Mr. Shackles was acquainted with a young artist of striking skill in the art of preparing effective "blocks," and he treated Miss Tristram's

drawings with the utmost freedom. He regarded them as an excellent and suggestive basis for really striking pictures, and he took care that, by the time the picture reached the "block" stage, it possessed some striking elements.

Claude Westwood also seemed to think that he could scarcely do better than ignore the words that Agnes had spoken to him when he had come to her for congratulations. He made an effort to resume his former friendly relations with her, but he never quite succeeded in his efforts in this direction. Agnes, he felt, did not respond to him as he had expected she would, and she gave him now and again the impression that she still regarded their relations as somewhat strained. He was obliged to see Clare frequently, and he was too polite to ignore the presence of Agnes, though she would have much preferred him to do so, and he knew it. The fact of his knowing it made him feel a little uncomfortable.

A week had passed in this unsatisfactory way, when one afternoon, Agnes, having come in from her drive, sat down with Clare to their tea and hot cakes. The girl was not quite so lively as she had been during the week, and Agnes noticed the change, inquiring the cause of it.

Clare coloured slightly, and laughed uneasily.

"Somehow I feel a little startled," said she. "Claude has been here."

"What, you consider that a sufficient explanation?" said Agnes.

Clare laughed more uneasily still.

"He has been saying something that startled me. The fact is that he—well, he thinks that I—that he—I should rather say that we, he and I, would complete the book more satisfactorily if we were—You see, Agnes dear, he does not like coming here so frequently; he feels that he is trespassing upon your patience."

"He is wrong, then," said Agnes. "But what is the alternative that he proposes?"

"He thinks that we should get married at once and go to the Court together," replied Clare, in a low voice.

"And what do you say to that proposal?"

"Well, you know, dearest Agnes, it is not six months since my dear mother's death: still—ah, dear, would she not wish to see me happy?"

"Yes; but is that saying that she would wish to see you married?"

"He is coming tc talk to you about it after dinner to-night."

Clare spoke quietly as she rose from her seat and left the room.

He came very late. Agnes only was in the drawing-room, for Clare had gone to her studio after dinner, saying she wished to finish one of the pictures.

He was as uneasy in addressing her as Clare had

been. He began to speak the moment he entered the room. Agnes interrupted him.

"You have not yet seen Clare," she said.

"I have not come to see her. It is you whom I have come to see," said he. "The fact is, my dear Agnes"—

"Go to her," said Agnes. "Go to her and kiss her; it will be for the last time."

She spoke almost sorrowfully. He was impressed by the tone.

"For the last time—to-night, you mean to say," he suggested.

"For the last time on earth!" said she.

"You are mad," he cried, after a pause, during which he stared at her. "You are mad; you do not know me—you do not know her."

"You will not go to her?"

"I will not go to her—I will not leave this room until you have told me what you mean by saying these words. You shall tell me what these words mean—if they have any meaning."

"Very well, I will tell you. A week ago you said some words to me. You put a question to me which I promised to answer at my own time. You said, 'Will you force me to wish that I had never seen you?' You said that to me—you—Claude Westwood—to me."

"I admit that I was cruel—I know that I was cruel,"

"Oh no; you were not cruel. You have shown me since your return that you regard women as too humble an organisation to be susceptible of great suffering. You are a scientific man, and one of your theories is that the lower in the scheme of creation is any form of life, the less capable it is of suffering. You cleave your worm in twain—there is a little wriggle—no more—each half goes off quite briskly in its own way. You chop off a lizard's tail without causing it any particular inconvenience; I wonder if you think of me as a little better than the worm, a little higher than the lizard. How could any man say words of such cruelty to a woman whom he had once promised to love, if he had not believed her to be dead to all sense of suffering?"

She stood before him with her hands clenched and her eyes flashing; but only for a few moments. Then she made a gesture of contempt—she gave a little shudder as she turned away from him.

He remained motionless for a brief space, then went without a word to the door. The sound of his fingers on the handle caused her to look round.

"Don't go away for a moment," she said. "You will pardon that tirade of mine, I am sure. I don't know how it was forced from me. I shall not be so foolish again."

"I think I had better go: you are scarcely yourself to-night," said he.

"Scarcely myself? Well, perhaps I am not. I must confess that that outburst of mine surprised me. It will not occur again, I promise you."

"I think I had better leave you."

He still stood at the door. In his voice there was again a tone of reproach. There was some sadness in the little shake of his head, as though he meant to suggest that he was greatly pained at not being able to trust her.

His attitude stung her. She became white once more. She put up her hand to her throat. She was making a great effort to calm herself. Still it was some moments before she was able to say:

"Very well, very well. Do not come any nearer to me. You came to talk business. Continue. You were about to tell me that you mean to go to London to-morrow in order to get the document that will enable you to marry some one without delay. The name of Claude Westwood will appear at one part of that document. What name is to appear beside yours?"

"Why do you ask that?" he said, removing his hand from the handle of the door.

"In order to prevent any mistake," said she. "You have probably sent forward to the proper authorities the name of Clare Tristram."

He was grave. He shook his head sadly, and put his hand upon the lock of the door once again. He somehow suggested that he expected her to tell

him that it was not the name of Clare Tristram but of Agnes Mowbray which should by right be on the special licence, beside his name.

She took a step toward him, as if she were about to speak angrily; but she checked herself.

"There is no such person as Clare Tristram," she said.

He gave a single glance toward her. Then he sighed and shook his head gently as before. He turned the handle of the door.

"Don't open that door, for God's sake! She is the daughter of Carton Standish, who killed your brother."

He did not give a start nor did he utter a cry as she whispered those words. He only turned and looked at her. He looked at her for a long time—several seconds. The silence was awful. The clock on the bracket chimed the second quarter.

"My God! mad—this woman is mad!" he said, in a whisper that sounded like a gasp.

She made no attempt to reply. He went to her.

"What have you said?" he asked. "I don't seem to recollect. Did you say anything?"

"I stated a fact," she replied. "I am sincere when I say that I would to God it were not true."

"She—she—my beloved—the daughter—it is a lie—you have told me a lie—confess that it is a lie!"

"I cannot, even though you should make your fingers meet upon my arm!"

He almost flung her away from him. He had grasped her by the wrist. He covered his face with his hands. She looked at her wrist—the red marks over the white flesh.

"I'll not believe it!" he cried suddenly. "Agnes, Agnes; you will confess that it is a falsehood?"

"Alas! Alas!" she cried.

"I'll not believe it. Proofs—where are your proofs?"

"This is the letter which she brought to me from her mother—the letter written by her mother on her deathbed."

She unlocked an escritoire, and took out a letter. He glanced at it, and gave a cry of agony.

"O God—my God! And I cursed him—I cursed him and every one belonging to him!"

He threw himself into a chair and bowed his head down to his hands.

"I prayed that evil might fall upon all that pertained to him," he cried. "My prayer has been heard. The curse has fallen!"

"Is there any tragedy in life like the answering of a prayer? I prayed for your safe return, and—you returned."

She spoke without bitterness. There was no bitterness in her heart at that moment.

There was a long pause before he looked up.

"And you—you—knowing all—allowed us to be

together—you did not keep us apart. You brought this misery upon us!"

"I thought you were safe from such a fate; it was only when we were at the Court that I learned that you loved her; even then I believed that she loved another man. When I said those words of warning to you a week ago, what was your reply to me? 'Do not make me wish that I had never seen you.' Those were your words."

"And what shall my words be now?"

A little thrill went through her. She turned upon him.

"You wish you had never seen me?" she said, her voice tremulous with emotion. "But if that is your wish, what do you think is mine? Nine years—my God!—nine years out of a woman's life! Ruin—you have made my life a ruin! Was there ever such truth as mine? Was there ever such falsehood as yours? Do you remember nothing of the past? Do you remember nothing of the words which you spoke in my hearing in this very room nearly nine years ago? 'I will be true to you for ever—I shall make a name that will in some degree be worthy of you.' Those were your words as we parted. Not a tear would I shed until you had gone away, though my tears were choking me. But then—then—oh, my God! what then? What voice is there that can tell a man of the agony of a constant woman? The days, the months, the

years of that terrible constancy! nights of terror when I saw you lying dead among the wild places of that unknown world—nights when a passion of tears followed a passion of prayer for your safety! Oh, the agony of those long years that robbed me of my youth—that scarred my face with lines of care! Well, they came to an end, my prayer was answered, you returned in safety; but instead of having some pity for the woman who had wasted her life in waiting for you, you flung me aside with scarcely a word, and now you reproach me—you reproach me! Give me back those years of my life that you robbed me of—give me back my youth that I wasted upon you—give me back the tears that I shed for you—and then I will listen to your reproaches."

"I deserve your worst reproaches," said he, his head still bowed down. "I deserve the worst, and you have not spared me."

"Ah, I have spared you," she said. "I might have allowed you to marry the daughter of that man, and to find out the terrible truth afterwards."

"It is just that I should suffer; but she—she—my beloved—is it just that she should suffer?"

He had risen and was walking to and fro with clasped hands.

"Alas! alas! Her judgment comes from you. It was you yourself who repeated those dreadful words—'unto the third and fourth generation.'"

"She is guiltless—she shall never know of her father's crime."

He had stopped in the centre of the room and was looking toward the door.

"She shall not hear of it from me," said Agnes. "She shall at least be spared that pain, in addition to the pain of parting from you."

"She shall be spared even that," said he in a low voice.

"What?"

"I cannot part from her. It is too late now."

"You do not mean that"—

"I mean that I shall marry her."

A cry came from Agnes before he had quite spoken.

"Ah, you will not be so pitiless," she said. "You will not do her that injustice. You will not wreck her life, too."

"I will marry her," said he doggedly.

"You will marry her to make her happy for a month—happy in a fool's paradise—happy till you begin to think that the face beside you may be the same as the face that watched your brother lying in his blood—that the hand which you caress — Oh, Claude, cannot you see that every day, every hour, she could not but feel that you are nursing a secret that separates you more completely from her than if an ocean were between you? Can you hope to keep that secret from her? Do you know nothing

of woman? Claude, she will read your secret in a month."

"God help me, I will marry her and let the worst come upon us!"

"You shall not do her this injustice if I can help it."

"You cannot help it."

"I will tell her that she is the daughter of Carton Standish; and then, if she chooses to marry you, she will do so with her eyes open."

She went to the door.

"No—no; not that—not that," he cried.

She opened the door and called the girl's name. He threw himself once more down on a chair and bowed his head.

The answering voice of Clare was heard, and then the sound of her feet on the oak floor of the passage.

"You will come here for a few moments, Clare," said Agnes, and the girl entered the room.

He kept his face bowed down almost to his knees, as he cried:

"No, no; don't tell her that. Take her away; I cannot look at her. Take her away; tell her anything but that."

Clare gasped. She caught the arm which Agnes held out to her.

"Clare," said Agnes, "you must nerve yourself for the worst. Mr. Westwood wishes to be re-

leased from his engagement to you. He has heard something; that is to say, he has come to the conclusion that—that he must leave this country without delay—in short, to-morrow he sets out for Africa once more."

"That is not true!" cried Clare. "I can hear the false ring in your words. Claude—Claude, you do not mean"—

"Take her away—take her away! I cannot look at her. I see him—him in the room."

The girl gave a start, and looked from the one to the other. She straightened herself and the expression on her face was one of defiance.

"Very well," she said. "Yes, it is very well."

She gave a long sigh, then a gasp. Her face became deathly white. She did not fall. Agnes had caught her in her arms.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE blow had fallen. His punishment had come, and Agnes, lying on her bed that night, felt that she would have given everything that she possessed to avert it. If there had been any thought of revenge in her heart originally—and she felt that perhaps there had been some such thought the moment that Sir Percival Hope had told her what she should have seen for herself long before, namely, that Claude Westwood was in love with Clare—there was now nothing in her heart but pity for the girl whom she had left sleeping in the next room.

She felt that she had been amply revenged upon the man who had treated her so cruelly. She had crushed him with a completeness that would have satisfied even the most revengeful of women. She had seen him flying from the house without waiting for the girl to recover consciousness. What finer scheme of vengeance could any woman hope for—and she had always heard that women were revengeful—than that which had been placed within her reach?

And yet she lay awake in her tears, feeling that she would give up all she had in the world if by so doing, she could compass the happiness of the man who had treated her so basely, and of the girl who

had supplanted her in his love. She felt that revenge was not sweet but bitter.

When she had been standing before him in the room downstairs and had felt stung to the soul by that horrible question of his, "Will you make me wish that I had never seen you?" she had had a moment of womanly pleasure, thinking of the power she had to crush him utterly; but all her passion had amounted to no more than was susceptible of being exhausted in half-a-dozen phrases. Her passion of reproach, which found expression in those words that had been forced from her, had not lasted beyond the speaking of those words. So soon as they were spoken she found herself face to face not with the delight of revenge, but with the grief of self-reproach.

She was actually ready to heap reproaches upon herself for having failed to see within the first hour of the arrival of Clare that the man loved her. How was it that she had failed to see that their meeting aboard the steamer had resulted in love? She felt that she must have been blinder than all manner of women to fail to perceive that this was so. Was she not to blame for having allowed them to be together day after day, while she had in her desk that letter which told her that no two people in the world should be kept wider apart than Claude Westwood and Clare Tristram?

She recollected that at first her impulse had been

to send the girl away; but when she found that she and Claude were already acquainted, and that the terrible secret was known to neither of them, the panic which had seized her subsided.

That was, she felt, where she had been to blame. She should not have wilfully closed her eyes to the possibility of their falling in love. Even though the advice which Sir Percival had given to her—the advice to wait patiently until Claude's old love for her returned—was still in her mind, she now felt that if she had been like other women she would have foreseen the possibility, nay, the likelihood, that Claude would come to love the girl by whom he had clearly been impressed.

She even went the length of blaming herself for feeling, as she had felt on Sir Percival's suggesting to her that Claude had come to love Clare, that it was the decree of Heaven that she should punish the man for his cruelty to her. She knew that it had been a grim satisfaction for her to reflect that his punishment was coming. She had, in her blindness, fancied that it was to assume the form of his rejection by Clare, and she had hoped to see him crushed as he had crushed her.

"Ah, if I had not been so willing to see him humiliated I might still have had a chance of averting the blow which has fallen on both of them—that is the worst of it, on both of them!"

This was actually the direction which was taken

by her self-reproaches as she lay in her tears with no hope of sleep for her that night.

She felt, however, that though she had been to blame in some measure for the catastrophe which had come about, she could not in the supreme moment have acted otherwise than she had done.

Claude had said truly that the girl at least was innocent. He who a few weeks before had attempted to justify his thirst for revenge by quoting the awful curse "unto the third and fourth generation" had, when it suited him, talked about the innocence of the girl—about the injustice of visiting upon her head the sins of her father. But Agnes knew that she had done what was right in refusing to allow him to see Clare again unless to tell her the truth about her father.

The way he had shrunk from her at the moment of her entering the room, not daring even to glance at her—the way he had cried those words, "Take her away, take her away," convinced Agnes that she had acted rightly and that she had saved Clare from a lifetime of sorrow. Before the end of a month he would have come to look at her with horror. He would seem to see in her features those of her father—the man who had crept behind Dick Westwood in the dark and shot him dead.

But then she began to ask herself if she had been equally right in telling Claude Westwood what was the true name of Clare. She reflected upon the fact

that only she knew that Clare was the daughter of the man Standish, who was undergoing his life-sentence of penal servitude for the murder of Dick Westwood. If she had kept that dreadful secret to herself, Claude would have married the girl, and they might have lived happily in ignorance of all that she, Agnes, knew.

Yes, but how was she to be certain that no one else in the world shared her secret? How was she to know that the unhappy woman who had been married to Carton Standish, and had in consequence become estranged from all her friends in England—for the man, though of a good family, had been from the first an unscrupulous scamp—was right when she had told her in the letter, which Clare had delivered with her own hand, that no one knew the secret?

Perhaps a dozen people had recognised in Carton Standish the man with whom the Clare Tristram of twenty-two years before had run away, although no one had come forward to state that the man who had been found guilty of the murder of Mr. Westwood was the same person. Agnes knew enough of the world to be well aware of the fact that not only in Brackenshire but in every county in England the question "Who is she?" would be asked, so soon as it became known that Claude Westwood had got married.

Claude Westwood, the African explorer, was the

man on whom all eyes had been turned for some months, and he could not hope to keep his marriage a secret even if he desired to do so. It would be ouside the bounds of possibility that no one should recognise in the name Clare Tristram the name of the girl who, twenty-two years before, had married a man named Carton Standish; so that even if Agnes had kept her secret it would eventually have been revealed to Claude, when it would be too late to prevent a catastrophe.

"If I had wished to be revenged I would have let him marry and find out afterwards that she was the daughter of Carton Standish," cried Agnes, as she lay awake through the hours of that long night. She felt that she had some reason for self-reproach, but not because she had sought to be revenged upon the man who had so cruelly treated her. Only for an hour had the thought of revenge been in her heart, and it had not been sweet to her, but bitter.

Once she rose from her bed and stole softly into Clare's room. The girl was lying asleep; and the light in the room was not too dim to allow of Agnes's seeing that her pillow was wet with tears. Still, she was now asleep and unconscious of any trouble. It was Agnes who had been unable to find comfort in the oblivion of sleep, and she returned to her bed to lie waiting for the dawn.

It stole between the spaces of the blinds, the grey dawn of the winter's day—the cheerless dawn that

drew nigh without the herald of a bird's song—a dawn that was more cheerless than night.

She rose and went to the window, looking out over the valley that she knew so well. She saw in the far distance the splendid woods of Branksome Abbey, Sir Percival Hope's home, and somehow she felt comforted by letting her eyes rest upon the grey side of the Abbey wall which was visible above the trees. She had a feeling that Sir Percival might be trusted to bring happiness into her life. From the first day on which he had come to Brackenshire she had trusted him. She had gone to him in her emergencies—first when she had wished to have Lizzie Dangan taken care of, and afterwards when she had wanted that large sum of money which had saved the Westwoods' bank. He had shown himself upon both those occasions to be worthy of her trust, and then—then—

She wondered if he had known how great was her temptation to throw herself into his arms upon that morning when he had stood before her to tell her in his own fashion that he loved her. Such a temptation had indeed been hers, and though during the weeks that passed between the arrival of the telegram that told her of Claude's safety and his return, she had often reproached herself for having had that temptation even for a moment, yet now the thought that she had had it brought her comfort. She thought of Claude Westwood by the

side of Sir Percival, and she knew which of them was the true man.

Noble, honourable, self-sacrificing, Sir Percival had never once spoken to her of his love since that morning, though he had seen how she had been treated by the man to whom she had been faithful with a constancy passing all the constancy of women. So far from speaking to her of his love for her, he had done his best to comfort her when he had seen that Claude on his return treated her with indifference, giving himself up to the savage thoughts that possessed him—the savage thirst for blood that he had acquired among the savages.

She remembered how Sir Percival had told her that Claude was not himself—that he had not recovered from the shock which he had received on learning of the death of the brother whom he loved so well, and that so soon as he recovered she would find that he had been as constant to her as she had been to him.

It was to this effect Sir Percival had spoken, and she, alas! had felt comforted in the hope that she would be able to win him back to her. That had been her thought for weeks; but now. . . . Well, now her thought was:

"Why did I not yield to that temptation to throw myself into his arms and trust my future with him on that day when he confessed his love to me?"

It was a passionate regret that took possession of

her for a moment as she let fall the curtain through which she had been looking over the still grey landscape, with a touch of mist clinging here and there to the sides of the valley, and giving a semblance of foliage to the low alders that bordered the meadows.

"Why—why—why?" was the question that was ringing round her while her maid was brushing her hair. She had ceased to think of her constancy as a virtue. She was beginning to yield to the impression that only grief could follow those who elected to be constant, when every impulse of Nature was in the direction of inconstancy. One does not mourn for ever over the dead; when a woman has been inconstant in her love for a man, the man is chagrined for a while, but he soon consoles himself by loving another woman.

Yes, she felt that Claude Westwood had spoken quite truthfully and reasonably when he said that in affairs of the heart Nature had decreed that there shall be an automatic Statute of Limitations. He had spoken from experience, and to that theory—it sounded cynical to her at first, but now her experience had found that it was true—she was ready to give her cordial assent. To such a point had she been brought by the bitterness of her experience of the previous month, she actually believed that she wished she had failed in her constancy to the man whom she had promised to love.

She was surprised to find Clare awaiting her in the breakfast-room. The girl was pale and nervous, for Agnes noticed how she gave a start when she entered. In the room there was a servant, who had brought in a breakfast-dish, but the moment she disappeared, Clare almost rushed across the room to Agnes.

"Tell me what has happened," she said imploringly. "Something has happened—something terrible; but somehow I cannot recollect what it was. I have the sensation of awaking from a horrible dream. Can it be that I fainted? Can it be that I entered the drawing-room, and that he told you to take me away? Oh, my God! If it is not a dream I shall die. 'Take her away—take her away'—those were the words which I recollect, but my recollection is like that of a dream. Why don't you speak, Agnes? Why do you stand there looking at me with such painful sadness? Why don't you speak? Say something—something—anything. A word from you will save me from death, and you will not speak it!"

She flung away Agnes's hand which she had been holding, and threw herself on a chair that was at the table, burying her face in her hands.

Agnes came behind her and laid her hand gently on her head. She drew her head away with a motion of impatience.

"I don't want you to touch me!" she cried, al-

most pettishly. "I want you to tell me what has happened. Oh, Agnes, he did not cry out for you to take me away—that would be impossible—he could never say those words!"

She had sprung up from the table once more and had gone to the fireplace, against which she leant.

"My poor child! My poor child!" said Agnes.

"Do not say that," cried Clare impatiently. "Your calling me that seems to me part of my dream. Good heavens! are we living in a dream?"

"You have been living in one, Clare; but the awaking has come," said Agnes.

Clare looked at her with wide eyes for more than a whole minute. Her look was so vacant that Agnes shuddered. The girl gave a laugh that made Agnes shudder again, before she moved away from the mantelpiece, saying:

"How is it that we haven't sat down to breakfast? I'm quite hungry."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AGNES sat down to the breakfast-table as if nothing had occurred, and Clare helped her to some fish, and put a portion on her own plate, and actually ate it with some appearance of appetite. Agnes tried to follow her example, but utterly failed. She could eat nothing. She thought she would be able, however, to drink her coffee, so she filled the cups, and, as usual, placed one before Clare. But Clare shook her head, saying:

"I don't like coffee to-day. I somehow feel that I cannot have anything to-day that I have had on other days. I cannot touch coffee."

"Then I will take it away, and get you"—

There was a little crash. Clare had let her knife and fork fall upon her plate.

"Those were the words," she cried. "'Take her away—take her away!' And I fancied that he spoke them—he—Claude—shuddering all the time and shrinking away from me." Then she turned suddenly to Agnes, saying:

"Tell me the truth—surely I may as well know it sooner as later. Did he say those words when I entered the room?"

"Yes," replied Agnes, judging rightly that Clare would be less affected by hearing the worst than if

she were left in suspense. "Yes. Claude Westwood said those words—then you"—

"Yes, but why—why—why?" cried the girl. "Why should he say such words, when only a couple of hours before—I don't think it could have been more than a couple of hours before, though if you were to tell me that it was days before I would believe you—at any rate, hours or days, he told me that he loved me—yes, and that we must get married at once. And yet he said those words?"

"Dearest child," said Agnes, "you must think no more about him. He should never have entered into your life. Have you never heard of the inconstancy of man?"

"I have heard more about the inconstancy of woman," said the girl. "But even if I had heard that all men are inconstant in love I would not believe that Claude Westwood was inconstant. You must tell me some better story than that if you wish me to believe you."

"Inconstant? Inconstant? Ah, if you but knew, Clare."

"I do know. I know that it is a lie. He is a true man. I love him and he loves me. It is you who are not constant in your friendships. You profess to care for me"—

"It is because I do care for you that"——

"That you tell me what is false?"

Agnes burst into tears.

Clare for a moment was rebellious. The effect of the anger, under the impulse of which she had made use of those bitter words, supported her; but in another moment she was on her knees beside her friend, with an arm round her waist, while she covered her hand with kisses.

"Forgive me, forgive me for my cruelty, my dearest Agnes," she whispered. "Ah, my dearest, you are the only friend I have in the world, and what have I said to you? You will forgive me—you know that I am not myself to-day—that I do not know what I say!"

Agnes put down her face to the girl's and kissed her. It was some time, however, before she could speak, and in the meantime Clare was sobbing in her arms.

What was Agnes to say to comfort her? What words could she speak in her ears that would soothe her? She could only express the thought which was nestling in her own heart and seemed to give her some consolation in the midst of all the bitterness of life:

"My Clare—my Clare—we shall always be together. Whatever may happen, nothing can sunder us."

And the girl was comforted. She was comforted, for she wept on Agnes's shoulder for a long time, and Agnes knew the consolation that comes through tears.

When she lifted up her head from its resting-place she was able to say:

"I will ask for nothing more, my dear Agnes. I will ask for nothing better to come to me than this—to be with you always—to feel that you will be ever near. You will not turn from me, dear—you will not cry out for some one to take me away?"

She could actually say the words now with a smile. She had, indeed, been comforted.

"I will take care of you," said Agnes. "I will take care that no one shall come between us. We shall go away from here to-morrow, if you wish—anywhere you please. I know of some beautiful places along the shores of the Mediterranean. You and I shall go to one of them and stay there just as long as we please. Then we can cross to Africa. You have never been in Algiers. I was there once with my father. Everything you see there is strange. That is the place which we must seek. Sunshine in January—sunshine and warmth when the east wind is making every one miserable in England."

"I was hoping to see an English spring," said Clare, wistfully. "But I will go with you," she cried, with suddenly brightening eyes. "Oh yes; I feel that I must go somewhere—somewhere—anywhere, so long as it is away from here."

Agnes pressed her hand tenderly, saying:

"You may trust in me."

Clare left the room shortly afterwards, and Agnes came upon her later on in the room that she had made her studio. She was standing in front of the easel on which her last half-finished drawing rested. On the small table beside her were a number of memoranda and suggestions for the pictures that were to illustrate the book.

"Who will finish them now?" she said, as Agnes came near and looked at the sketch on the easel. "Will they ever be finished?"

After a long pause she turned away with a sigh.

"I wonder if it is possible that he heard something bad about me," she said. "I have heard of stories being told by unscrupulous persons—girls—about other girls. Is it possible, do you think, that some one has poisoned his mind by falsehoods about me?"

"No, no; do not fancy for a moment that anything like that happened," said Agnes. "I am afraid—no—I should say that I hope—I hope with all my soul that you may never know the reason for his estrangement. It is a valid reason—I can give you that assurance; but I dare tell you no more. Now come away, my dear child. Whatever has occurred be sure that no blame attaches to you. Claude Westwood himself would never think for a moment that you are to blame. Oh, my Clare, you are only to be pitied."

The girl stood irresolute for a few minutes, then she said:

"It is all a mystery—a terrible mystery! But God is above us—I will trust in God."

In the afternoon Clare went to her room to lie down, and before she had been gone many minutes Sir Percival Hope called at The Knoll.

When he took Agnes's hand he looked inquiringly at her. His expression seemed to say:

"Is the time come yet?"

He did not let her hand go. She did not withdraw it. He could not fail to see the little flush that had come to her face.

"What you have suffered!" he said. "What you are suffering still! You did not sleep last night. My poor Agnes! I know now that I did not give you the right advice. You should not have been patient with him. You should not have hoped that he would be brought to you again. If I had given you the advice which my heart prompted me to give I would have said otherwise to you; but I wanted to see you made happy, and I thought that your happiness lay in patience."

"You were wrong," she said, with a wan smile. "I was patient, but no happiness came to me."

"And you still love him?" said he in a low voice.

She snatched her hand away.

"I—love him—him?" she cried. "Oh no, no; he is not the man I loved. The moment he came

before me with the look of a savage on his face and the words of a savage thirsting for blood on his lips, I knew that he was not the man I loved. The man whom I had promised to love—the man for whom I was waiting, was quite another one. The Claude Westwood who entered this room had, I perceived, nothing in common with the Claude Westwood who had parted from me in this same room, saying, 'I shall make a name that will be in some measure worthy of your acceptance.' Listen to me while I tell you that that very night, when I went to my room, I took the miniature of the man whom I had loved and trampled upon it. And yet —ah, I tried to force myself to believe that I was sorry. I tried to force myself to believe that I loved the man who had come to me telling me that his name was Claude Westwood. I knew in my heart that I did not love him. Ah, what he said to me was true. He said—a smile was on his face all the time—'Every seven years a man changes utterly: no particle of him remains to-day as it was seven years ago.' And then he went on to demonstrate, quite plausibly, quite convincingly, for indeed he convinced me at once, that it was ridiculous for a woman to hope that, after seven years, the same man whom she had once loved should return to her; it was physically impossible, he explained, and this system he termed, very aptly, 'Nature's Statute of Limitations.'"

"My poor Agnes!"

"Then it was I knew that, so far from being sorry that that man did not love me, I felt glad. I knew that there remained no particle of love for him in my heart when you told me that he loved Clare Tristram, for I felt no pang of jealousy. Poor girl—poor girl!"

"Let us talk no more about him. Agnes, has my time come yet? I have been wondering for some days past if I should tell you—if I should tell you what I told you on that morning long ago. You know that it was true then; you know that it is true now."

"Not to-day—I implore of you not to ask me to say the words that you think will make you happy —the words which I know will make me happy."

"I will not ask you to say one word beyond that, my beloved."

He had caught her hand and was holding it in both his own, smiling.

She shook her head.

"Do not assume too much," she cried. "I cannot be happy to-day—oh, it would be heartless for me to be happy while that girl is wretched!"

"Wretched? It cannot be possible that he has turned away from her within a month?" said Sir Percival. "Seven years, not weeks, was the space of time named by him."

"It was impossible that anything but misery

could come of his love for her," said Agnes. "The misery has come. Poor child! I should be inhuman if I thought of my own happiness to-day while the waters have closed over her head."

"I do not want another word from you, believe me," said he. "I am content—more than content—with what you have said to me. There is in my heart nothing but hope. Good-bye."

He remembered that on the morning when he had told her that he loved her, she had given him her face to kiss. But he made no attempt to kiss her forehead now. He did not even kiss her hand. The curious pathos of her words, "I cannot be happy to-day," had appealed strongly to him. He was a man who had become accustomed to self-sacrifice. He left the house, having only touched her hand.

She heard his footsteps passing away on the hard gravel of the drive. She recollected how, on that morning when they had been together on the lawn, and he had left her with an abruptness that startled her, she had hurried to intercept him on the road. The impulse was now upon her to do as she had done that morning—to open the window and run across the lawn into his arms. She checked herself, however; she felt that it would be heartless for her to have so much happiness while Clare was overwhelmed with the misery that had fallen on her.

She turned away from the temptation of the

window and seated herself in the dim light before the fire, giving herself up to her thoughts.

She had not quite recovered from the surprise that her own confession to Sir Percival had caused her. She had been amazed at the impulse under the force of which she had told him so much. Until that moment she had had no idea what was in her heart—what had been in her heart since the day of Claude Westwood's return. She knew, however, that she had confessed the truth to her friend: she had been deceiving herself when she thought she still loved Claude Westwood—when she thought she was sorry that she had flung his portrait on the floor of her room.

She had found it amazingly easy to be patient in regard to his returning to his old love for her; but it was only when she stood in front of Sir Percival that she knew how it was that she had neither been impatient for Claude's return to the old love which he had borne for her, nor jealous when she had come to learn that he loved Clare Tristram. She now knew that the Claude Westwood who had come back from Africa was not, in her eyes, the Claude Westwood whom she had promised to love.

Her awaking had come in a moment—the moment that Sir Percival had taken her hand. The scales fell from her eyes in a second, and her own heart was revealed to her, and what she saw in its depths amazed her. She felt amazed as the con-

fession was forced from her in the presence of the man whom she trusted, and she had not recovered from that amazement when it was time for her to go to bed. She lay awake, thinking over all that had been revealed to her, and wondering how it was that she had been blind so long. It never occurred to her now to ask herself if what she had said to Sir Percival was true or false. When people see plainly the things before their eyes they do not need to puzzle over the question of the reality of those things.

The next day Clare was much more tranquil than she had been before. There was a certain brightness in her eyes that gave Agnes great hope that her future would not be so clouded, but that a glimpse of sunshine would touch it. She made no allusion to Claude Westwood or his book; and after breakfast Agnes saw with pleasure that she had gone outside to feed the pigeons. She stood among them, calling them about her with that musical croon which acted like magic upon them; and they alighted upon her shoulders and whirled about her head, just as they had done on the afternoon she had arrived, when Claude had looked out at her.

Agnes was once again overcome with self-reproach as she thought how it might have been possible for her to prevent the misery that had entered the girl's life.

"If I had only known—if I had only considered

the possibility which every one else but myself would have regarded as not merely possible—not merely probable—but absolutely inevitable, I would have taken her away the next day," she moaned.

She turned away from the window with tears in her eyes, and when she looked out again, hearing footsteps on the drive, Clare was not to be seen. It was the postman who was coming up to the house.

Three letters were brought to Agnes. Two of them were ordinary business communications: the third was in the handwriting of Cyril. She had received two letters from her brother since he had arrived in Australia, and both were written in the most hopeful spirit. He had, he said, found the life that suited him.

She cut open the envelope, and began to read the letter. But before she had finished the first page, a puzzled look came to her face. She laid the letter down for a moment and put her hand to her forehead. In another second she had sprung to her feet with a short cry—not loud, but agonising—

"Oh, my God! my God! the thought of it—he—he—my brother!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE letter dropped from her hand to the floor. She felt her knees give way. She staggered to a sofa and fell upon it. Her eyes closed. She had not fainted, however: the blessing of unconsciousness was denied to her. She could hear through the stillness every word of the conversation that took place between the postman and one of the maids who had been exchanging pots of heath for the porch with the gardener. The postman had clearly brought some piece of news of an enthralling character, for its discussion involved many interjectional comments in the local dialect.

She could hear every word now, though she had not paid any attention to the beginning of the conversation, having been in the act of reading Cyril's letter.

What was it that they were talking about?

A murder?—it must have been a murder. The postman became graphic as he described the nature of the wound. Agnes fancied she could hear the servant breathing hard in compliment to the skill of the narrator. The wound had been caused by a shot—so much was certain—it had struck the victim in the back and he had fallen forward clutching at the grass, "like this," the narrator said—the pause

of a few seconds was filled up by low exclamations of horror.

He was describing the murder of Dick Westwood, Agnes believed; for the details, so far as she heard, applied to that crime. She glanced with an affrighted eye toward Cyril's letter that still lay on the floor—yes, but why should they be talking about the murder of Mr. Westwood upon this day in particular? Why should the postman pause in his round to describe with a skill which only comes of long practice and a thorough acquaintance with the susceptibilities of a rustic audience, a deed which had been described times without number during a period of several months?

"There he lay in his own plantation, and there they found him," continued the man, when he had illustrated the attitude of the man who was shot. "They found him and thought he was dead. He wasn't, just at that moment, but I heard said that the doctor was ready to take his oath that he couldn't be alive for six hours, so mayhap he's gone to his last long 'count by now, good friends. For Surgeon Ogden is none of the men that pulls a long jaw down at every little matter, whether natural—like females, or more terrifying, of the likes of us—nay, he's ever cheery, as you may know if you've been that fort'nate to come under his hands—ever cheery in hisself, though of course, being polite, he feels hisself bound to be as grave as the gravest

when some of their ladyships fancies that there's summat wrong wi' 'em. Ah no; the surgeon is too much the gentleman hisself to make light o' th' ailments o' the nobility, as though they was as humble as us. And to be sure, if you give it a doo consideration, good people, you'll find it quite reasonable and natural-like for him that comes to cure to make out a case to be as evil as possible—'tis on the self-same principle that Tombs, the tailor, makes out that our old coats are terrible far gone when we take 'em to be repaired, so that when he sends 'em home as fresh as new we think a deal of his skill. Ay, and for that matter his reverence the vicar, or even a simple-minded curate, will tell us by the hour how terrible steeped in evil all of us is, so that when he gets one to take the pledge we looks on 'un as a dreadful sharp gentleman to be able to make us presentable. Well, well, him that lies dead this day was mayhap a bit hard, but 'tis a sad fate to fall upon any man; and so God help us all."

Agnes heard every word that came from the long-winded postman, and the succeeding comments of his auditors. But her attention had not been taken away from the letter which was lying on the floor. It was only because it seemed to her that the subject of the man's story was the same as that of the letter, she had been startled into listening—curiously, eagerly.

But the instant the drone of the man and the long-drawn and wondering sighs of the maid had ceased, she got to her feet—not without an effort—and crossed the room to where the letter was lying. She looked at it for some time before she stooped and picked it up. She went over every line of it again, saying in a whisper the words that it contained. It was a short letter.

Could she by any possibility have misread it the first time? It was a short letter:—

"With what feelings, dear Agnes, will you read this letter! But I feel that I must write it—I should have confessed all to you when I could have done so face to face, but I was a coward. Often at night aboard the steamer coming out here, I thought upon my guilt, and night by night when in the midst of the great pasturages I have thought over it, and felt how great a ruffian I was, especially as another is suffering for my sin. I cannot endure the stinging of my conscience any longer. Agnes, I must make a clean breast of it to you. Hear me and do not abhor me utterly when I confess to you now that that sin—that crime which came to light in the summer—you will know to what I allude—I cannot name it to you—was mine. I kept my guilt a secret and allowed one who was innocent to suffer for me. Was there ever so base, so cowardly a wretch? I am unworthy to be your brother. Only one way

remains to me of making reparation, and you know what that way is. I am coming home by next steamer. Dearest Agnes, can you ever forgive me for the disgrace I have brought upon you? Indeed, I feel that this is the bitterest part of my punishment—the knowledge that I have disgraced our name.

"CYRIL."

She read the letter a second time. It left no loophole of escape for her. Its meaning was but too plain. It appeared in every line. The crime—there was only one crime to which it could refer—there was only one crime for which an innocent man was suffering punishment.

Once again the letter dropped from her hand. She looked at her fingers that had held it as though it had been written with blood that left a stain behind it. For some moments she gazed at the thing lying on the floor at her feet, trying to comprehend all that it meant to her. She felt stunned, as though she had been struck on the head with a heavy weapon. The sense of what that letter meant benumbed her. She was overwhelmed by the force of the blow which she had received.

She stood there in the middle of the room, both her hands pressed against her heart. She could hear its wild beating through the silence. The force of its beating caused her to sway to and fro on her feet,

"It is folly—folly!" she said, as if trying by giving articulation to her thoughts to convince herself against the evidence of her own judgment. "It is folly! He was his friend—Dick Westwood was his friend. Why should he have killed him? He dined at the Court that very night—he—Good God! he was the last to see him alive. Let me think—let me think! What did he say? Yes, he said that Dick had walked across the park with him. He admitted that he was the last person with whom Dick had spoken. Oh, my God—my God! he has written the truth—why should he write anything but the truth? Why should he be mad enough to confess to a crime that he never committed? He killed him, and he is my brother! Oh, fool—fool—that I was! I could not see that that girl was sent through the mercy of God. She was sent here that the man who loved her might be saved from marrying me. But, thank God! I have learned the truth before it is too late."

And then, as she stood there, she recalled the most trivial incidents of the morning after the murder of Dick Westwood. She remembered how late it was when Cyril had appeared—how he had made excuse after excuse for remaining in bed. In every trivial act of his she perceived such evidence of his guilt that she was amazed that no one had attached suspicion to him. Why, even the fact of his having so eagerly accepted the offer of an ap-

pointment on a sheep station in Australia should have made her suspect that he had the gravest of reasons for wishing to get away from the country. She now saw that his anxiety was to leave the scene of his crime behind him.

Then she thought of the days that preceded his escape—that was how she had come to regard his sailing for Australia—how terrible her trouble had been with him. She had felt that he was going to destruction, idling about the tap-rooms of Brackenhurst, walking with the most disreputable men to be found in the neighbourhood—utterly regardless of appearances and impatient at her remonstrances. Thinking of all this in the light of the confession which she had just read, she was left to wonder how it was possible that she had failed—that every one in Brackenhurst had failed—to attach suspicion to him.

"He did it—he did it!" she whispered.

Once again with a flicker of hope that was more dispiriting than despair, she read the letter, and with a cry of agony fell back upon the sofa and laid her head, face downward, upon one of its arms. Claude Westwood had uttered his curse against the murderer of his brother and against all that pertained to him! She had been horrified at the thought of Clare; but the curse had fallen, and she, Agnes, was crushed beneath it. Her brother was on his way home to pay the penalty of his crime, and Clare—

She got upon her feet, and stood with one hand grasping the back of the sofa, as the thought flashed through her mind: Clare would be happy. There was now no reason why she and Claude might not marry. Even at that moment, when the horror that had rested on Clare's head had been shifted to her own, Agnes felt a thrill of satisfaction when she reflected that it was in her power to give Clare happiness.

She took a step to the bell-rope, but while it was still in her hand, a thought suddenly flashed through her mind: the story which the postman had been telling to the gardener and the maidservant—to what did it refer?—to whom did it refer?

Some one had been shot during the night—so much she had gathered from the rambling discourse of the man; she had not given much attention to all that he had said, but she recollected that it had struck her as singular that the incidents of the matter to which his story referred closely resembled those of the murder of Dick Westwood: the man might have been describing the latter. The victim had, she gathered, been shot in the back, and—what had the man said?—he had been shot in his own grounds. Some one had been shot in his own grounds? Who—who—who?

Why, who could it be but Sir Percival Hope? It could be no one but Sir Percival Hope—the man whom she loved.

That was the terrible thought that swooped down upon her, so to speak—that hawklike thought that struck its talons through her; and at that moment such doubts as might have lingered in her heart were swept away. She now knew that she loved Sir Percival Hope, who was lying at the point of death, if the man who had come with the story had spoken the truth.

"Thank Heaven—thank Heaven that he knew the truth before he died; thank Heaven that he knew I loved him; and thank Heaven that he died before he could know that other truth—that we could never be anything more to each other than we were. I should have had to tell him that—all that that letter has told to me. But I have still to tell some one of it. Who is it—who is it?"

Her brain was whirling. She had forgotten for the moment that Clare had to be made happy; and some moments had passed before the sight of the bell-rope brought back her thoughts to the object which she had originally before her in going to it. She rang the bell, and when the butler appeared she had her voice sufficiently under control to ask him to tell her maid to find Miss Tristram and send her to the drawing-room.

As the butler was leaving the room she said—and now her voice was not quite so firm as it had been:

"I heard the postman telling some story to the gardener just now. Has some one been hurt?"

The man did not answer for a second or two, but that space was sufficient to send her thoughts wandering once more on a different track.

"Merciful Heaven!" she cried. "It cannot be possible that it is Mr. Westwood who was shot, as his brother was—within his own grounds?"

"Oh no, ma'am, it's not so bad as that," replied the butler. "So far as I hear, it was the poachers that have been about Westwood Court one night and the Abbey Woods another night for the past month. It seems that Ralph Dangan, Sir Percival Hope's new keeper—him that was at the Court for so long—he came upon them suddenly last night and they shot him. The story is that the poor man was not likely to live longer than a few hours."

Agnes gave a sigh—she wondered if the butler would know that it was a sigh of relief rather than one of sympathy for the unhappy man who had been shot.

"Poor fellow!" she said. "I hope his daughter has been sent for."

"I didn't hear anything in that way, ma'am," said the butler. "If she went to Sir Percival's sister, he will know her address, but they say that poor Dangan always refused to see her, though she was a good daughter except for her one slip."

He left the room, and Agnes sat wondering how it was that she had been led to feel with such certainty that the story of the man who was shot re-

ferred to Sir Percival. And in its turn this question of hers became a terror to her, for in her condition of excitement she had lost all capacity to judge of incidents in an unprejudiced way. The condition of her brain caused her to distort every matter which she tried to consider on its merits.

She waited so long without any one appearing that she had actually forgotten what was the object of her waiting, and she was surprised when her maid came into the room saying:

"I cannot find Miss Tristram in the house, Miss Mowbray. I think she must have gone out for a walk by the lower gate; she could not have left by the drive without my seeing her, for I was sitting at the window of the workroom sewing."

CHAPTER XXX.

"It is strange that she should have gone out without letting me know," said Agnes. "I don't think that it is likely she would leave the grounds by the lower gate. She must still be somewhere in the garden. Having fed the pigeons she might have strayed up to the Knoll."

The Knoll was the small hillock overgrown with pines from which the house took its name.

"She was in her dressing-room since she fed the pigeons," said the maid. "I fancied that I heard her leave the room, but no one appears to have noticed whether she left the house or not."

"You will please send a couple of the servants round the grounds and up to the Knoll," said Agnes. "It is rather important that she should be found with as little delay as possible."

"I beg your pardon," cried the maid quickly. "I did not know that you wanted Miss Tristram particularly. I understood that you were making a casual inquiry for her. Not a moment shall be lost in seeking for her."

When the door closed behind the maid, poor Agnes once again began to take exaggerated views of the simplest occurrences. The disappearance of

Clare she thought of as something mysterious. Why should she go away without acquainting any one of the fact that she was leaving the house? Why should she steal out by the lower gate, which involved a walk through the damp grass of the shrubberies? The lower gate was scarcely ever used in the winter months, and but rarely in the summer except by the gardener, whose cottage was at that part of the grounds.

The incident assumed in her excited brain a magnitude which in ordinary circumstances she would never think of attributing to it. And her reflection in regard to this incident was followed by a suspicion that caused her to cover her eyes with her hands.

She was endeavouring to shut out the horrible sight which might be before the eyes of the servants who were searching the grounds. She had heard of sensitive girls, such as Clare undoubtedly was, making away with themselves when overcome with grief; and she began to wonder how it was that she had failed to see something more than usually pathetic in that picture of the girl surrounded by her pigeons on the lawn. That was the picture which had come before the eyes of Claude Westwood, and that was the picture which would always remain in her own memory, Agnes was assured—the last look she had had of the sweet girl who was now—

She shuddered at the thought that came to her; for with it came a cry of self-reproach:

"It is I—I—who have killed her! She may have been alive when I got the letter that should have given her happiness; but I waited—I tried to deceive myself into the belief that I had misread the letter when its meaning was clear to me from the first. I have killed her!"

She rushed from the room and hurried up the stairs to the apartment that Clare had occupied. She turned the handle of the door with trembling fingers, and looked fearfully into the room, not knowing what horrible sight might await her there. But the room was the same as ever; only when she entered did she notice that the bed was slightly pressed down in the centre, and that the pillow was no longer smooth; it was tossed, and there was a mark that was still damp upon it.

She knew that Clare had suddenly flung herself down on the bed, and had left the traces of her tears upon the pillow.

She gave a start, hearing the sound of feet on the oak of the hall. The servants had returned from their search, and the shuffling of their feet told her that they were carrying something with them—something with a cloak over it—a pall over it. She put up her hands to her eyes once more to shut out that sight; and then she heard the quiet steps of some one ascending.

She knew what this meant: some one was coming to break the awful news to her as gently as possible.

She was standing at the half-open door when the maid reached the lobby.

"You need tell me nothing; I see upon your face all that you come to tell me," whispered Agnes.

The woman looked at her in surprise.

"I fear you are not quite well, ma'am," she said quietly. "We did not need to search far: the gardener came up and told us that he had met Miss Tristram walking on the road not more than half-an-hour ago. He had been down to the larches and Miss Tristram was going in the direction of Unwin Church. It was as I suggested: she was taking a walk, having left the grounds by the lower gate. I am sure that she will be back again before lunch. Are you not well, Miss Mowbray?"

"I am quite well," said Agnes. "I was only a little surprised that Miss Tristram could have left the grounds without my noticing her do so. I was in the drawing-room all the time."

She went to her own room and stood at the window, wondering how it was that she had been so certain that Clare had resolved to die. Was it because she herself was ready to welcome death at that moment? She fell on her knees and prayed that she might have strength to live—she prayed that she might have strength to resist the tempta-

tion to end in a moment the terrible consciousness that in another week or two all the world would be ringing with the name which she bore—the consciousness that every finger would be pointed at her, while those who pointed at her would whisper the name of her brother. She prayed for strength to bear the appalling burden which had been laid upon her.

In that nervous condition which was hers she felt that she must do something: she could not rest patiently until the return of Clare. She felt that as she had told Claude the secret which had placed a gulf between him and Clare, it was right that she should tell him without delay that, although it was true that the girl was the daughter of Carton Standish, yet Carton Standish was innocent of the crime for which he was suffering imprisonment.

She rang her bell, and gave orders for the brougham; and then, with nervous hands, she put on her fur coat and hat, and went down to the hall fire to wait for the sound of wheels. The butler, who was bringing some silver into the dining-room for the luncheon table, paused for a moment and asked her if she would wish the hour for lunch to be delayed. She told him that lunch was to be served when Miss Tristram should come in.

A sudden thought occurred to her. She would not keep Clare waiting for her good news should she come in before her own return from the Court.

She had thought of driving Claude back with her in the brougham after she had communicated her good news to him—it would be good news to him. What did he care how heavy was the blow that had fallen upon her so long as he was free to marry Clare?

She went into the study and wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper:

"DEAREST,—God has been good to you. Something like a miracle has happened, and the barrier which Claude saw between you and him is removed. I am bringing him to you. Wait for our coming.

"AGNES."

She addressed the cover and desired the butler to give it to Clare the moment she returned.

At last the sound of the brougham was heard on the drive. She entered the carriage after satisfying herself that Cyril's confession was in her pocket.

The butler at the Court said that Mr. Westwood was not at home at that moment; he thought that most likely he was gone to the cottage of Dangan, Sir Percival Hope's keeper, who, as perhaps Miss Mowbray had heard, had been shot during the night. Mr. Westwood had said, before leaving the Court, that he would be back for lunch, so perhaps Miss Mowbray would wait in the drawing-room

for his coming. It was unlikely that he would be late.

Miss Mowbray said she would wait, and was shown into the drawing-room.

For a few minutes after seating herself she was calm; but then her brain began to whirl once more. The thought came to her that she was in the very room where Cyril and Dick had sat on that night before the horrible deed was done. She started up, thinking that perhaps she was sitting in the very chair in which her brother had sat looking in the face of the man whom he meant to kill.

She glanced at the portrait on the easel and seemed to see once again the form of Dick Westwood beside the window through which he had gone to his death.

"Why did he do it—why—oh, why?" she whispered. "You were always so good to him, Dick—you were always his friend when every one else shunned him. How could he do it?"

She had begun to pace the room wildly, but after some moments a curious doubt seemed to cross her mind. She took the letter out of her pocket and read it for the third time with beating heart, for the echo of that question of hers, "Why —why—why?" seemed to ring round the room. Surely she must have misread it.

She crushed it into her pocket once more.

"It is there—there," she whispered. "He con-

fesses it. There is no hope for me. No hope—no hope"—

She had begun pacing the room once more, and as she spoke she found herself standing in front of the glazed case of poisoned arrows which Claude had brought back with him from Africa.

She looked at the arrows and repeated the words, "No hope—no hope."

The beating of her heart sounded through the stillness.

"I was wrong—I was wrong," she whispered, with her eyes still gazing at those strange things as if they had power to fascinate her. She looked at them, then with a shudder she turned and fled across the room. "No, no, not that—not that!" she cried.

She stood beside the screen at the other side of the room; and then she seemed to hear again the voice which had said those words in her ear—"The sister of a murderer—the sister of the man who killed his best friend. He will be here in a day or two and all the world will ring with his name—with your name. There is no hope for you—no hope!"

She put her hands over her ears, trying to shut out that dread voice; but it would not be shut out. It came to her with maddening monotony. She walked to and fro saying beneath her breath:

"Mercy—mercy—for God's sake, mercy!"

She made a pause as if listening for something. Then with a cry, in the agony of her despair, she rushed back to the case of arrows and crashed in the glass with both her gloved hands.

In a second her hands were grasped from behind.

"Agnes! Agnes, my beloved!" said Sir Percival.

She turned to him, looking wonderingly up to his face.

"My dearest, what has happened? What does that mean?"

He pointed to the broken glass while he was leading her away.

"You will soon know all," she said. "I have the letter—it will tell you what I have no words to tell."

He took the letter from her hand, and with one of his hands still holding hers, he read it.

"This tells me no more than I have known from the first," said he.

"What, you knew that he was guilty?" she said.

"I knew it: I hoped that he would confess to you."

"Good God! You knew of his guilt and let the innocent man suffer?"

"I heard nothing of that. I liked the girl for keeping the secret; he will marry her now."

She stared at him.

"Who is the girl that knew it was he who killed Richard Westwood?" she asked.

"My poor Agnes! You are the victim of some dreadful misapprehension," said Sir Percival. "This confession refers to Lizzie Dangan's fault."

"What! But the murder—surely it can have but one meaning?" she cried.

"Oh, my beloved, I see it all now. Thank Heaven that I came in time to save you. You assumed that your brother's confession referred to the murder of Richard Westwood. You were wrong. I have just come from hearing the confession of the man who shot poor Westwood, and who died a quarter of an hour ago. It was Ralph Dangan who shot Richard Westwood with the revolver that by ill-luck he had found on the grass where the man Standish had thrown it. Dangan had seen Mr. Westwood with Lizzie that night—she had gone to him secretly for advice—and he shot him, believing that he was the girl's lover."

Agnes looked at him for a long time. She walked to the window and stood there for some moments; then with a cry she turned and stretched out her arms to him.

"My beloved—my beloved, you have suffered; but your days of suffering are over!" he whispered, as he held her close to him.

* * * * * *

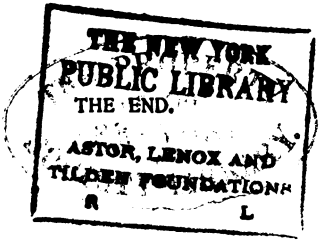
There were voices at the door.

Claude Westwood entered, followed by Clare; he hurried to Agnes.

"For God's sake, tell her nothing! It is too late now—she is my wife," he said, in a low voice.

"Agnes—dearest, you will forgive me—but he sent for me, and I love him," said Clare.

"Tell him," said Agnes to Sir Percival, "tell him that it was Ralph Dangan who killed poor Dick."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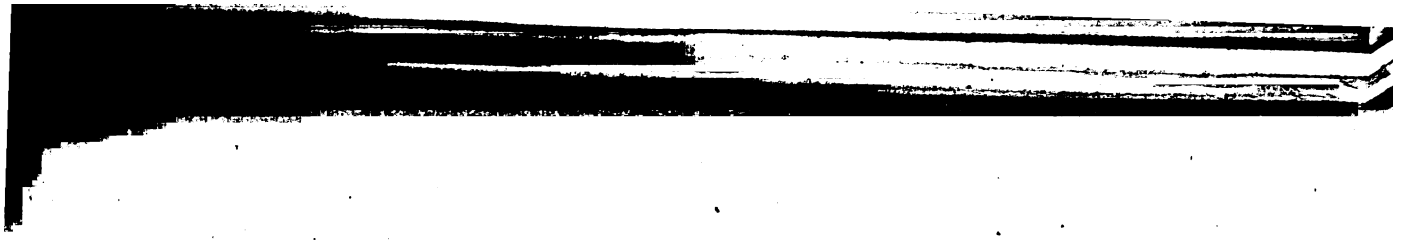
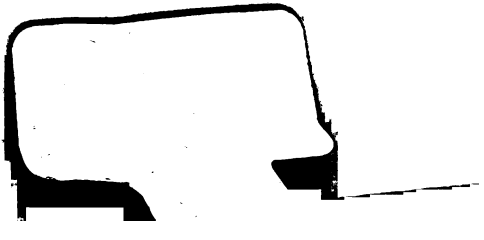
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